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P R O C E E D I N G S

MS. AFZAL: Good morning, everyone. Thank you all for joining us for our event today, hosted by the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, on America and Afghanistan, one year after the withdrawal.

I am Madiha Afzal, I'm a fellow in the Foreign Policy program at Brookings, part of the Center for Middle East Policy, and I'm delighted to have an expert panel with two of my colleagues, as well as journalist Wes Morgan, all experts on Afghanistan, to discuss this important topic on a set of anniversaries.

So, yesterday marked 21 years since the September 11th attacks. Before that, August 30th marked one year since the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years of war and presence in Afghanistan. And before that, August 15th marked 1 year since the Taliban takeover of the country. That coincided, of course, with the collapse of the Afghan army and the Afghan government, that had been backed by the U.S.

And of course there has been so much attention, and there was so much attention, last year in August, focused on the chaotic nature of the withdrawal. The scenes, in particular, unforgettable scenes, at the Kabul airport on Afghan allies that we could not get out in time, and we'll discuss all of that.

But I think in that, we, sort of, have not always gone back to the bigger picture, which is that the U.S. defeated the Taliban in 2001, yet the 20-year presence in Afghanistan ended with the Taliban back in power in 2021. What does that mean for the country, what does that mean for the region, what does that mean for the U.S., what does that mean about the 20 years of the war and the presence in Afghanistan?

And as I said, here to discuss all of this, I have an expert panel, all three of whom have written extensively on Afghanistan over the years. Start off with my colleague Bruce Riedel, who's a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program, also at the Center for Middle East Policy. Bruce had a long career in the U.S. government. He chaired the

strategic review of U.S. strategy towards Afghanistan and Pakistan at the beginning of the Obama administration. Bruce is the author of many books, including “What We Won: America's Secret War in Afghanistan,” which focuses on the Soviet-Afghan war in the 1980s.

I have my colleague Vanda Felbab-Brown here. Vanda is a senior fellow in the Foreign Policy program, and the director of the Initiative on Non-state Armed Actors. She has done extensive fieldwork in Afghanistan over the years, and is the author of multiple books, including “Aspiration and Ambivalence: The Strategies and Realities of Counterinsurgency and State-building in Afghanistan.”

And finally, last but not least, we're delighted to be joined today by Wesley Morgan. Wes is a journalist and the author of “The Hardest Place: The American Military Adrift in Afghanistan's Pech Valley,” a book that came out last year, in March 2021. Just before President Biden announced, sort of, the final withdrawal of U.S. troops. And Wes wrote that book as an embedded reporter, and the Pech Valley, right after the surge that began under President Obama. So just -- you know, I wanted to start off with a retrospective on the war. And, you know, I wanted to mention some of the costs of the war, and some of the gains of the war. But the costs are, of course, astronomical.

So, this is the costs of war project from Brown University that estimated that the U.S. spent more than 2.3 trillion dollars on the war over 20 years. And of course, there are costs of more, in terms of lives lost of U.S. military personnel more than 2300. U.S. contractors, more than 3900. Of Afghan national military and police, more than 69,000. Of Afghan national military and police, more than 69,000. Of Afghan civilians, more than 46,000. Of course, there was an uncertainty that began in Pakistan during the time of the war, and the group allied with the Afghan Taliban, the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan killed tens of thousands of Pakistanis over the border, so these are huge costs.

At the same time, there were counterterrorism gains that were made. The U.S. largely decimated al-Qaida, yet Ayman al-Zawahiri was found and killed in Taliban-run Kabul just last month. So, with that in mind, I want to turn to Bruce. And Bruce, if you could

just start us off, reflecting on, sort of, the 20-year arc of the war, in particular with your vantage point in the U.S. government during part of that time. And, you know -- and as I said, you shared the strategic review at the beginning of the Obama administration. Given now -- what we know now about how it ended, but how you looked at it over the time as well. Over to you.

Mr. Riedel: I was in the White House on the morning of September 11th. Was immediately evacuated out of the building. The decision to intervene in Afghanistan made by the Bush administration was really a no-brainer. We had very, very good intelligence that more al-Qaida attacks were being planned in Afghanistan, and in some cases were in the final stages of preparation. Including on an attack similar to 9/11 to be launched against the west coast in the United States. So, we had to react, we had to react quickly.

Unfortunately, the American military had no plan for what to do about Afghanistan, literally. The only plan we had was the CIA plan to intervene on behalf on the Northern Alliance, which is what, in the end, the Bush administration did. If you didn't read yesterday's Washington Post, it had an absolutely excellent article about the CIA officer who led the intervention, Gary Schroen, and the difficulties we had.

In short, we didn't have enough troops on the ground, and as a consequence, the al-Qaida leadership and the Taliban leadership were all able to flee into Pakistan. But we also had no plan for what to build after taking over Kabul. All of that had to kind of be invented on the ground, primarily at the Bonn Conference, where one of the most active players was, ironically, the Islamic Republic of Iran, with ideas on how to build a new Afghanistan.

Of course, in 2002 and 2003, we took our eye off the ball, and expertise and experience left Afghanistan and started to work on Iraq. Literally every Arabic-fluent case officer that had been involved in the Afghan operation was shunted off to work on Iraq. The consequence was that at the critical moment when we needed to build an Afghan

government that was capable of working, we weren't doing it, and we weren't giving it the resources. That was a self-imposed but absolutely critical mistake.

By the time Obama came into office in 2009, there were two realities: Al-Qaida had recovered, was rebuilt, and was planning new operations, straddling the Afghan-Pakistan border, and the Taliban were winning the insurgency. By every statistical measure, the Taliban were winning the insurgency. Obama, who had campaigned on Afghanistan as, quote, the good war, was very conflicted about what to do about Afghanistan. His vice president, of course, argued at the time for very limited counterterrorism approach, actually a downpullment of American troops that was almost exactly what he had inherited from the Trump administration.

Obama, after several studies, concluded two things. One, he was going to let the CIA drone operations against al-Qaida go completely as intense as possible, and second that we would fight an insurgency against the Taliban and bring in more troops.

The first strategy worked well, as you mentioned, Madiha, by 2011, 2012, al-Qaida was decimated. Not everyone was killed obviously, but the leadership was very much decimated. The open question today is, of course, can it recover in Pakistan-Afghanistan, now that the Taliban are back in office? I fear that that is a real, likely possibility.

The second strategy of counterinsurgency against the Taliban never got full support, was always timebound, and certainly did not get any support from the Trump administration when it came in, which embarked upon a negotiations process with the Taliban in which I have to say, the Taliban, as negotiators, out-negotiated the Americans on virtually every single point, leaving the Biden administration with a quasi-deadline for getting out, and of course, the events that we saw a year ago, which I don't need to go into detail here.

So, I think that the dominant point I would make about the arc of American involvement in Afghanistan is that it was never very well-planned, and it was always carrying

second place to another war in another desert, which had nothing to do, of course, with the attack of September 11th, 2001. Let me finish there.

MS. AFZAL: Excellent, thank you Bruce. I'll turn now to Vanda. Vanda, of course, you've done fieldwork in Afghanistan. I wanted to bring you in on this larger question on the back of the war, in particular, if you could comment on the nature of the Taliban insurgency over the years, and then the negotiations at the end, the peace process, and the end of the -- of the war.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, Bruce laid out the two thrusts of the effort, the counterterrorism effort that was principally geared toward al-Qaida and other terrorist group and counterinsurgency effort. And the counterinsurgency effort was not only conflicted, it often was directly in contradiction to the counterterrorism effort. Especially when a lot of the counterterrorism objectives questioned whether there was any need to build an Afghan state that was effective and accountable, and also that centered on embracing warlords, power brokers, leaders in the Afghan security forces who were promising that they were on the counterterrorism objectives by killing enough Taliban.

You asked us, Madiha, to reflect on, sort of, the larger lessons, and in fact the same problems why we lost, why the United States and the West lost and the Taliban one, we see repeated in counterinsurgency after counterinsurgency. Whether this is Northern Nigeria, or whether this is Mali, whether this is Niger, whether this is Mozambique, Somalia, I can't go through the whole set of them.

The counterinsurgency was able, at various times, to clear. It was struggling all this to hold, it rarely had any effective Afghan forces to whom it would hand off the whole portion, and it struggled to build. Moreover, there is another problem that spans all these conflicts, and mind you, is the fundamental, the critical issue that the United States and the West and for the other countries (inaudible). What do you do if the local leadership, your local partner, is deeply corrupt, deeply disinterested, deep parochial, interested in reaping the short-term material benefits for one's clique but not interested in governing that's

accountable, that operates on some basis of fairness, and that is not discriminatory around particular cliques?

So, all along, the fundamental issue was that the leadership and governance that the new Afghan republic was putting forth was often deeply resented by Afghans. And the further you went out of Kabul, the more you felt the problems of this very parochial, very corrupt, very self-interested leadership and governance that centered constantly on politicking, rather than making policy, rather than governing. What do I mean by that? The engagement of Afghan political elites became -- constantly it would generate crises within the republic to milk more payoffs from the leadership to reduce the crisis, have more personal benefits in terms of power and money for oneself, and one’s set of supporters. And this really characterized the entire 20 years of the efforts, the hope that where there that power would become more devolved, more accountable, wiser, more benevolent, when the Ashraf Ghani government came in really never materialized.

Meanwhile, the Taliban were a brutal force, and they are still brutal force. They are a brutal, authoritarian regime, a dogmatic movement as they were in the 1990s. But nonetheless, throughout the insurgency, they were capable of doing several things. They were capable of delivering governance that was brutal but predictable, and that people could develop coping mechanisms to. And often throughout my many travels around Afghanistan, and engaging with communities over the many years, over the 20 years that I had been there almost on a yearly basis and sometimes more than once a year, people would comment on the difficulty of negotiating life, dealing with governors and district officials, and power brokers linked with the republic, and in contrast with the brutality and repression that was very palpable from the Taliban, but then nonetheless delivered some predictable rules. And the Taliban excelled in other things, like delivering immediate justice resolution. I dispute resolution, I use the term justice here very carefully, but mediating between disputes, certainly in a way that was not necessarily accountable and would not hold up to Western standard, it's not something that we would want to live under. But

nonetheless, again, providing capacity for local communities to move on with their lives within the system of rules that was created.

What the republic was constantly delivering was corruption, exclusion, corruption to a point that the very same disputes would take years and years to deliver. The Taliban didn't have to be bribed; the republic had to be bribed constantly.

The second thing that the Taliban excelled, and we have to sort of look at insurgencies historically, and here is an insurgency that has been alive for 40 years that's twice defeated a major superpower, and that is back in the office. Now, we will come to about how long they'll stay in the office in the second part, but it's a remarkable insurgency. And so, the second reason they have been so effective, one was -- number one was that they delivered governance that, despite its horrors, was often more tolerable -- or tolerable enough to local communities. The second element of that was that they could calibrate their brutality in response to pushback from local communities. So, for example, we, through the past 20 years, we went through multiple instances when the Taliban would shut down girls' schools as they did when they are back in power. And you saw local communities being able to react effectively to the Taliban, engage the Taliban, engage in negotiations, and the Taliban would loosen the reins. They would never become rebellers, they would never become democrats, they would never embrace human rights and accountability, but they pull back from brutality and oppression that was intolerable to the local communities.

The fourth reason why they have been so effective is because they have been able to shut down other opposition. Their biggest problem is the Islamic state in Khorasan, they are still a problem today. Their struggle today what many other administrations in Afghanistan and best in counterinsurgency has struggled, namely dealing with urban cells of terrorists. But they were able to take away the ISK's rule areas, and they did so repeatedly, they did so with other groups. They have been quite effective in neutralizing an opposition to themselves.

And fourth and finally, and with this I'll hand it to you and to Wes, the

Taliban has really been markable in surviving leadership changes. Bruce spoke about the amount of drone attacks that went into decimating al-Qaida. But the United States had a similar policy of so-called high-volume targeting decapitation of the Taliban leadership. It was not just the Taliban leadership; it became very much defined as a very broad set of whoever Taliban leader was.

At various points we were killing Taliban commander of five men, who, he was Taliban commander. The United States, multiple times, went through the middle-level leadership, very low-level leaders, quote unquote, as well as, of course, kill actors like Mullah Mansur, which it might -- you -- was one of the blunders of our effort, at least at a tactical level. And all of this was done with the hope that, if we decapitate enough of the leadership, the Taliban would collapse on itself.

And really, since 2014, the United States, and Western policy, was, essentially, hoping that two things would happen. That the Taliban would make enough mistakes and it would shoot itself in the foot and undo itself, which the Taliban never did, and second, that the Afghan leadership would somehow miraculously come to realize their completely counterproductive and misguided ways would need to be changed, or else it would collapse the moment the United States withdrew, whether this was 2021, or whether this would be 2014.

MS. AFZAL: Great, thanks Vanda. I forgot to mention at the top that if you have questions, please -- to our audience, send them along. You can email events@brookings.edu with your questions, or, on Twitter, pose them with the hashtag, Afghan U.S., and we'll come to those questions towards the end of the discussion, in the last 15 to 20 minutes.

So, Wes, I now want to turn to you. Of course, you know, you described in such detail your experience as an embedded journalist, as an embedded reporter, in the Pech Valley. So, I was wondering if you could, again, reflect on this larger question of retrospective and lessons learned, but also discuss with us how -- what you saw in the Pech

Valley, about the military mission, how does that align with, or not align with, what we saw at the end in Afghanistan as a whole? So, how was that -- sort of, the collapse of the Afghan army, is that something you could have foreshadowed when you were, you know, in that -- in that region, at the beginning of the surge, with President Obama's surge, how does, you know, your experience in the Pech, sort of, give a larger picture of the military mission in Afghanistan? Over to you.

MR. MORGAN: Sure. So, the Pech is an area in northeastern Afghanistan that's very mountainous, very heavily forested, in some ways very different from many other parts of Afghanistan. But I chose to focus on it and tried to write, you know, not only about my limited experience in that valley, but about the broad experience of the U.S. military, and the CIA, and the joint special operations command over many years in this valley.

Because this place illustrates, you know, what Bruce and Vanda have been talking about, the dichotomy between counterterrorism on the one hand and counterinsurgency and nation-building on the other. I mean, I very clearly remember, in 2010, my first time in the Pech, being at this little outpost and the battalion commander there, a lieutenant colonel who had been there in the counterterrorism mission, now he was there with the regular army in the counterinsurgency mission, and he would go on to return to this area in various roles. Putting it very starkly to me, in, kind of, an in-brief in his office when I visited his unit in a way that I hadn't heard other commanders put it in, you know, many in-beds with many different units. He said, you know -- he said, I read the same news as you do, and what we're doing here isn't very clear. Are we chasing terrorists, or are we building a nation? It isn't very clear.

Now, I think in part, that was because the Pech, unlike many other areas of Afghanistan, is a place where both the counterterrorism thread and the counterinsurgency thread were constantly represented throughout the 20 years of war. You know, there are many parts of Afghanistan where U.S. forces wound up facing off against local Taliban, fighting people who had never left their district, and never, kind of, saw their counterterrorism

effort. In the Pech, on the other hand, there always was a presence of al-Qaida. Sometimes a very low-level presence, sometimes a more overt presence. But really, the story arc there is, the United States goes in there for counterterrorism aims, this is, in fact, could our provinces swear Bin Laden initially sought safe haven after being driven out of Tora Bora in December 2001? So, the joint special operations commanded the CIA go up to Kunar, sort of, trying to pick his trail back up, but they're always a couple steps behind him. They then hand things over to the conventional military, and things snowball, basically, out of control. You see this phenomenon where outposts are built, bases are built, missions are undertaken by one arm of the military, you know, JSOC or the Green Berets, or some -- you know, smaller special operations organization. Then they gradually hand things over to the conventional military, without really explaining to them what the underlying logic had been for the decision in the first place. And over time, you see outposts and missions, you know, roadbuilding projects, whatever it may be, take on logics of their own that are unmoored from the original -- the original logic that put them there in the first place.

In the course of this process, which, you know, goes up through the surge years in Afghanistan, what you really see is, the U.S. military always puts training, and advising, and building up the Afghan military very much in the backseat. This is -- it's never the primary effort of the mission. You know, the U.S. Army, it's sort of -- it's very focused on defeating the Taliban insurgency, creating -- you know, creating white spaces, they would say, with U.S. forces to, in theory, protect the population so that these theoretical Afghan forces can come in and take over later. But at every step along the way, building up those Afghan forces is kind of an afterthought. Afghan forces are dragged along as auxiliaries to check a box, they're not -- they're not the main effort.

And over time, what you see is, you know, by the time the military realizes its error in the post-surge era and starts to really devote more resources to advising and training, they've kind of spoiled the place. Sort of a golden hour has passed, a lot of good will is gone, and in places like the Pech, or like Helmand, or the Arghandab Valley in the

south, places where really the fighting was at its most intense. Outposts that were built for the counterinsurgency purposes of being bubbles of security for the population instead become bubbles of insecurity, bubbles of danger. They draw in conflict. And the U.S. military over time gradually collapses in on these outposts, until a point where it's, kind of, just defending itself.

You know, belatedly, after U.S. forces have, kind of, washed their hands of some of these places, including the Pech, the Afghan army gets up and running, and this is what the third or four parts of my book is about, is, sort of, this -- the period where the Afghan army gets on its feet in the Pech, takes things over. But it's crippled by the years that it has spent as just an auxiliary force to this large U.S. conventional presence. You know, the Afghan army has been built in a sense not to fight on its own, but to fight as auxiliaries for a U.S. and international presence that is completely reliant on airpower, has very sophisticated and expensive logistics systems, so then, when, you know, Afghan forces are, kind of, left on their own, they just -- they're not able to cut it. You know, they had been built to require systems that they will never have.

And then the story ends in, you know, the fourth part of the book with, kind of, a return to counterterrorism. As U.S. forces withdraw from the Pech, ironically in the post-surge era, al-Qaida in Pakistan, at that very moment, is under the heaviest pressure of its history from the CIA drone campaign, and Bin Laden, in his letters before his death, identifies in discussion with Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, his operational chief, he identifies this area north of the Pech Valley that U.S. forces have divested themselves of over -- after heavy losses, as a potential future safe haven, a place to go if the CIA drone pressure in, you know, in Waziristan and the FATA becomes too intense.

And so, this launches a period where the Joint Special Operations Command runs its own parallel drone campaign in the mountains north of the Pech, trying to prevent this future safe haven from coming into existence, and focusing on, sort of, an heir to the al-Qaida enterprise in Afghanistan named Farouq al-Qahtani, who becomes a very

serious, you know, focus for the Obama administration during its second term.

So, while the Afghan army is, you know, getting up and running in the Pech on its own terms on the ground, the Joint Special Operations Command is -- is hunting al-Qaida and the Taliban from the air. And in this final period of the war, you again see, kind of, a dichotomy between the counterterrorism mission, exemplified by JSOC's Operation Haymaker, the air campaign, and the nation-building mission with Afghan forces on the ground, which as has often been the case throughout the whole war effort, can really be at odds. The JSOC air campaign, for instance, you know, it's -- it can't -- it focuses heavily at first on genuine al-Qaida targets, but as it runs out of them, and as they become better at operational security, it shifts to hunting Taliban figures who are, kind of, ever more distantly related to these al-Qaida figures, in order to make it harder for the al-Qaida figures to, you know, to exist, to plan attacks, to have the kind of freedom of action that they would need to launch attacks overseas.

And the JSOC campaign is successful at this goal. It drives the al-Qaida guys farther and farther up into the hills. But at the same time, it also, in some ways, undermines the Afghan government. Because, you know, the drone campaign, it causes civilian casualties, albeit far fewer than earlier phases of the war. But even when it doesn't cause civilian casualties, there are effects like, you know, sort of, working your way through Taliban leadership.

You know, you kill a district governor that a community had an understanding with, he's replaced by another district governor who is much harder for the community to work with, and so on, and so forth, in a way that really builds resentment against the U.S.-backed Afghan government, you know, through no fault of the Afghan government. Even as, at the same time, you know, down in the areas that the government controls, it is -- you know, it's defeating itself in the ways that Vanda has described, through predatory behavior.

In the end, you wind up with this, kind of, a dilemma for the U.S.

government, where it faces two counterterrorism enemies, al-Qaida and the Islamic State, and it has to decide in the years and months before the Doha agreement, which one it's going to focus on. And it essentially makes the decision that the Islamic State in Afghanistan is the greater threat and uses the Taliban as a proxy to fight against it, because the Taliban is fighting against the Islamic State. And you wind up with this bizarre situation in the months before Doha, where, even as the U.S. military is pounding the Taliban with, you know, a tremendous air campaign everywhere else in the country, up in Kunar, it's actually tacitly supporting the Taliban against the Islamic state, and kind of ignoring and taking its eye off the ball of al-Qaida, the Taliban's allies up there.

And this is basically the situation that is, you know, in effect at the time of the fall of the government. So, yeah, I'll leave it there.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks, Wes, that was great. Yeah.

MS. FELBAL-BROWN: Could I just add one comment here. You know, you ask, Wes, was it foreshadowed, or I would say less than foreshadow, was it quite obvious in his book, and apart from his book, we had a demonstration of how Afghanistan would go down, and this was October 2015 when the province of Kunduz fell to the Taliban, was the first time that the Taliban took a provincial capital. I was in Afghanistan at the time, I was up north, not in Kunduz, I was in another province, and I did what everyone else -- all the Afghan, and we did was trying to get back as fast as I could to Kabul. And why did -- what happened in Baghlan foreshadowed, or not just foreshadow, blatantly displayed all the problems of the Afghan security forces. The poor unit leadership, corruption, ethnic divisions, a lot of abuse of Afghan soldiers by their leaders, hence very limited morality, great willingness to strike deals with the Taliban, something that was crucial for the collapse last year in the rapidity of the collapse, the Taliban's capacity, not just to negotiate the (inaudible) with units, but also to neutralize what a lot of the counterinsurgency was putting its stock in and hope, these various auxiliary forces, whether they were Afghan local police, the AB-3 (phonetic), the UFP (phonetic), searching acronyms for local militias, often being

seen as the way to get out of the fact that by 2014 the Taliban was ascending and slowly winning on the battlefield.

And by the time we get to 2017, 2018, when I would be in Afghanistan, I started hearing with a lot of frequency, if -- arguably on an anecdotal level -- immense amount of deal being done between the Afghan military and the Taliban. With units not mounting operations against the Taliban, providing intelligence to the Taliban, making the judgment that the Taliban was going to win, or at least that it was not worth fighting the Taliban. So, we had a preview of what would happen when the U.S. withdrew. No one expected it would happen in the span of six weeks, but we knew that the structure of the Republic was rotten.

MR. MORGAN: If I could jump in one more time here, I think there's another good preview that I do describe in the book. It's not as consequential or as large-scale as the fall of Kunduz, but when U.S. forces withdrew from the Pech Valley, literally a decade before the collapse of Afghanistan, in 2011, U.S. forces pulled out, they left an Afghan army battalion behind that was in no way prepared for what was to come. And rather than seeing, you know, a collapse, a mass attack on the bases of the Afghan forces in the Pech, what you do see is this dealmaking, almost immediately. And this, in fact, draws U.S. forces back in, just later in the same year, in 2011, because they fear that the unit left in the Valley is going to basically sell its base to the Taliban. They're listening in on signals intelligence, there's a split within the Afghan army battalion between one major who kind of wants to keep hanging on and fighting, and another major who is in touch with the Taliban and is trying to reach an accommodation with them. Probably wasn't actually trying to sell the base, but he was trying to reach an accommodation that would allow the unit to survive out there, you know, allowing the Taliban greater and greater access to the Valley. So, as with many things in Afghanistan, yeah, I think you can see things coming a long way ahead of time, if you -- you know, if you're willing to look at them and extrapolate them to a larger scale. But, you know, the U.S. military's solution in the Pech in 2011 was a misguided one,

it, kind of -- it returned to the Valley and kept doing what it had been doing before. Large air assault operations up into the hills to kill more Taliban. So, yeah.

MS. AFZAL: Great, thanks for that added perspective. That's really, really important. You know, one thing that I just want to highlight, one thing that Bruce mentioned in his opening remarks about the Taliban essentially out-negotiating the U.S., and, you know, underlying what all of you have mentioned, the U.S. Taliban deal signed in Doha, you know, in my opinion, it was fatally flawed, it was a fatally flawed deal. It excluded the Afghan government, the then-Afghan government, and didn't impose enough conditions on the Taliban. And, you know, didn't make the withdrawal conditional on any kind of power-sharing agreement which was, at that point, the goal. So, we basically, you know, gave the Taliban an unconditional withdrawal, and sort of, let them, essentially, take over the country.

I want to turn now to to, sort of, the situation in Afghanistan, in the region, and it's a grim situation in Afghanistan over the last year. And before turning to Vanda to describe, sort of, where we are today in Afghanistan, and sort of, the Taliban's internal and external policies -- and, you know, just -- I want to mention a few things. First, of course, the rights of women and girls, which have undeniably regressed, at least in the urban areas in Afghanistan, which had seen gains. And the rural areas, you know, things had not changed very much over the last 20 years. But in urban areas, you know, you, sort of, see the segregation of women and girls from society. You see them, basically, retreating from public life, and of course all over the country, girls are not allowed to attend secondary school, and we've seen protests, including just over the weekend, but protests, you know, periodic protests from women and girls over that decision, from the Taliban.

Afghanistan essentially has a nonfunctioning economy. Because it -- you know, the withdrawal brought about an economic collapse, with the drying up of aid that sanctions imposed on the Taliban, with reserves frozen, and we'll come to this -- these decisions. Job drying up, even for those who had jobs, they are not receiving salaries because there is no liquidity in the economy because of that nonfunctioning nature of the

economy. This has precipitated a humanitarian disaster that was already in the works, because of a drought. But at this point, of 19 million Afghans, half the population essentially face food and security -- you know, you have millions of malnourished children, hunger all around, essentially, in Afghanistan. And finally, on, sort of, special immigrant visas and Afghan allies, there are still tens of thousands who are waiting to -- for evacuations, waiting to be evacuated. And, you know, I want to highlight that, even for those who have been evacuated, you know, life does not look the way they wanted it to, because they struggle to find jobs and to adjust in the U.S., or in other areas where they are.

So, that's sort of the way I see the picture, and Vanda's going to speak more to this, of course, and also discuss, sort of, the leadership of the Taliban, the decision-making of the leadership. And then we'll turn after this, sort of, round, to U.S. policy and international policy towards the Taliban.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, thank you Madiha. We'll go to that, just want to add one comment on the people who have been evacuated. The other massive problem, of course, is that many people are still stuck in third countries. You know, often this means living in a hotel, or a room in Parakwai, or Uganda, as the process of clearing them and getting them relocated to the United States has been excruciatingly slow, so there's a lot of suffer in that domain as well.

Of course, the suffering in Afghanistan is massive. You spoke about the real impact of economic and humanitarian situation. There was significantly, last winter, of a massive famine that was avoided, but there is much greater fear that we will have a big famine this year, because people have depleted their reserves, their capacity to adapt, or at least if they have not depleted it fully, the reserve capacities are just much lower.

And as long as the legal situation remains such that liquidity cannot come to Afghanistan because of legal implications of any aid going to the Taliban leaders, which are under sanctions and or supporting terrorism, which is still a much broader set of laws against terrorist financing and material support clauses, we will constantly -- and as long as the aid

then centers on peanut butter, penicillin, and blankets, we will be just lurching from one bigger humanitarian crisis to another bigger humanitarian crisis.

The Taliban leadership rule so far has been authoritarian, dogmatic, and characterized by (inaudible), and much more inward looking than could have been the case, and this has part to do with the disposition of power within the Taliban, where power centers on the army, which is, in this case, (inaudible), the man who replaced Mansour.

I mention that it was a blunder for us to kill Mansour, because at the time targeting was really based about any kind of Taliban leader should be taken out, because this will weaken the Taliban leadership, and the Taliban will then collapse on itself. The consequences of killing Mansour where the much greater rise of power of (inaudible), his closeness to Pakistan and the ISI, and also the placement of (inaudible), who the Taliban leadership had expected to be a weak leader, not threatening in power to either Mullah Yaqoob or Sirajuddin Haqqani.

Alas, the Taliban, like the West, significantly miscalculated in whom they would end up with. (inaudible) and the set of shakes around him like the prime minister who are ruling. And their rule really focuses on the afterlife. The purpose of rule is to bring in a version of Shariya (phonetic) they believe is valid, it's one very narrow doctrine version of Shariya that is not replicated elsewhere in the world, very backward-looking version of Shariya, and if that means that people are starving, so be it, Allah rules it so. This is quite a contrast to the rest of Taliban leadership, that on the one hand, includes the more international-oriented people, like (inaudible), as well as those like Mullah Yaqoob and Sirajuddin Haqqani, who, while also (inaudible) and with terrorist backgrounds, nonetheless want to preserve rule on Earth, and want to rule Afghanistan for significant amount of time to come.

But these other leaders have not been capable of influencing the decisions in Kandahar, issue after issue after issue. So, for example, the issue of girl schools is not popular within the Taliban. It is not demanded by many Taliban leaders. In fact, there are

regular rank and file Taliban as well as the leadership Taliban who would like to see girls back in school, including their own daughters, but they don't dare challenge the current situation, the (inaudible). So rule has been authoritarian, exclusionary, the repression of women has gone up significantly, the minister of interior has often been focused on internal purchase (phonetic), internal repression. The Taliban has been very effective in repressing the position with one challenge, which is the Islamic state in Khorasan.

But the National Resistance Front, for example, and several other small groups that have emerged, remain feeble, and don't hold any territories, and do not pose any threat to the Taliban, even if they mount very small attacks. And if they appear that that is more of a threat coming, the Taliban puts it down.

At the same time, the Taliban has pulled back from some of the issues I mentioned, working to its success. It's reverted to more exclusionary rule, even within itself. It has marginalized ethnic Taliban commanders, who were critical for the Taliban victor. It has really shrank decision-making, and decision-making really consists of what the army and the clique around the army are (inaudible) want, which even (inaudible) to consult and put forth opinions from within the Taliban, to the leadership. So, there is massive problem with how decisions are being conducted, communicated, internal accountability, let alone external accountability. And of course, the technical capacities are very limited.

Let me just make a few comments about the counterterrorism picture, and then I'll hand it to Bruce. Which is that, both this internal rule and responses to the terrorist factors who have been flocking to Afghanistan from Pakistan, Syria, bigger fighters are there, are driven by the most significant axis on which the Taliban make decisions. To prevent defections and internal fragmentation. And the interpretation from Kandahar is that the way to avoid defection is to be as rigid, dogmatic, restrictive, as doctrinaire as possible. Now, that might be fundamental miscalculation, but this is what has been driving policy. One effect of that is not to challenge foreign fighters that are coming in, also not to jeopardize foreign funding for foreign fighters, and enhanced hubris and extraordinarily bad

decisions, like having (inaudible) in Haqqani's safehouse.

So, on the counterterrorism front, the most we can expect from the Taliban, and it's still to be seen, is, not that they will neutralize the foreign groups operating in Afghanistan, but that perhaps they will not allow attacks outside of Afghanistan to take place, which is the wording they have been using steadily.

MS. AFZAL: Thanks, thank you Vanda. Bruce, I'd like to turn to you now on this issue, sort of, you know, where we are in Afghanistan, but to broaden it out. The regional implications of the withdrawal, and the regional winners and losers, if you will.

MR. RIESEL: Certainly. The withdrawal was a really strategic shift. For 20 years, America had made Afghanistan its principal objective in Central and South Asia, and now the Americans are gone. There are many losers from this, and not even sure there is one winner, but I will try to identify one winner. Let me start with the losers. First of all, Iran. As I mentioned earlier, Iran was in many ways America's partner in trying to develop the government in Afghanistan. Neither Tehran nor Washington ever wanted to talk about it in those terms, but in fact on the ground that is what was going on. Iran has a long history of hostility towards the Taliban. They almost went to war with each other back in the 1990's. And I think that the Iranians have every reason to expect that the Taliban government on their eastern border is going to be a long-term problem for them.

Already, the Taliban have resorted to a tactic that they've used for years, which is extreme violence against the Shia minority, the Hazaras in Afghanistan. These minorities have long been proteges of the Iranian government, and this is a very source of great unease in Tehran.

Second loser, India. India was another major partner in trying to support the government of Afghanistan, gave considerable aid to the government of Afghanistan. For geopolitical reasons, the United States never wanted to have boots on the ground in Afghanistan, but certainly it had political boots, it had intelligence boots on the ground. Those organizations in India who were deeply involved, like the Indian Intelligence Service,

are now very, very worried about what's going to happen next. They know that there are very strong connections between the Taliban and anti-Indian groups, particularly Lashkar-e Taiba, the group that attacked Mumbai in 2008.

As Vanda suggested, the most the Indians are hoping for is that Lashkar-e Taiba will not be allowed to stage attacks against India directly from Afghan territory, but they don't even think that that's likely to be what the Taliban does. Certainly the Taliban is not going to put Lashkar-e Taiba and other groups under any kind of control, they're really now finding that these groups are building new sanctuaries, new safe havens across Afghanistan, and very much concerned about what this will mean in the long term.

India, of course, has no military option to deal with this problem, because Pakistan stands between it and Afghanistan, and it certainly does not want to use any military options. The Irani have some limited military options because they have a border, but India does not.

Third, a loser who's not necessarily a regional player, per se, is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. When the United States first went into Afghanistan in 2001, the Department of Defense made it very clear it didn't want allies to have boots on the ground there, and it resisted any kind of international stabilization force. As time went on, that attitude changed completely, and by the second term of the Bush administration, getting NATO into Afghanistan was a big priority. Particularly as it was obvious that NATO was not going to support us in Iraq, at least maybe we could get some help in Afghanistan. We were remarkably successful in doing so, and many NATO partners came in, worked very hard, Germany for example, Sweden, others. Some lost interest, but most stayed in. And when the withdrawal came, many of these partners who were very, very angered that they were not consulted, that they were essentially told to get on an airplane and get out, without any effort made to try and preserve what they had built over the years.

Afghanistan was NATO's so-called out of area, meaning not European, operation, and I think it's safe to say that Afghanistan will be NATO's last out of area

operation.

The one winner I would identify is Pakistan. It certainly is a winner, but I would also say it's a very problematic victor, and I will come to the problems in a minute. Now Pakistan, as we've all alluded to over the course of the last hour, has been Taliban's ally for 30 years, if not longer. It provided the Taliban with sanctuaries and safe havens from America. It assisted in training, assisted in strategy development, and assisted in fundraising. All of this was done by the Pakistani intelligence service, the Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, ISI, and by the Pakistani military high command.

The civilian leadership from Pakistan was not all that involved in this, but certainly made no effort to prevent it or to alter. This relationship was especially close with the Haqqani network Vanda has been talking about previously. So, the victory of the Taliban is, in a sense, a victory of the ISI and the Pakistan army, very much like their victory over the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. But it's troublesome, just as that earlier victory was very troublesome. First of all, Pakistan now takes on some responsibility for what to do about governing Afghanistan. But it has very limited means to do anything about that. It takes on some responsibility for the economic catastrophe that's going on in Afghanistan, but again it has very limited capacity to do anything about that.

Most importantly, the Taliban have close ties to some very problematic actors in the Pakistan Taliban. And we are already seeing an increase in extremism on the Pakistani side of the border as a direct consequence of the Taliban's victory in Kabul. The issue has been somewhat overshadowed over the last year by Pakistan's own very serious problems, first the downfall of the Imran Khan government, and his emergence as a force of opposition to Shehbaz Sharif, mass demonstrations and all of that. And then second the climate disaster that has struck Pakistan this summer, probably one of the most serious forewarnings of what the rest of us are going to see is happening in Pakistan today.

So, Afghanistan, the Taliban have all been on the backburner in Islamabad and Rawalpindi, but these problems are not going to go away, and how Pakistan deals with

Afghanistan over the long term is very difficult to say.

I will identify, in closing, one other point. I think there's a direct line between the withdrawal of NATO and America, America withdrawing and taking NATO with it in August of last year, and this Russian decision to invade Ukraine. Because I think the Russian leadership came to the conclusion that the NATO organization had been severely weakened by what happened in Afghanistan. In retrospect, we can see that, like on so many other points, the Russian leadership was deluded, made a mistake, so much of their intelligence seems to have been very, very poor, and their intelligence about NATO's capacity to rebound once it was faced by an in-area, very serious act of aggression, was a big mistake by the Putin government. So, let me finish there.

MS. AFZAL: Okay, thank you. I will just add one quick point on, sort of, Pakistan's relationship with the Taliban, which has seen, sort of, fissures emerge, although they've tried to paper them over over the last year, you know, including over the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan and so on, but as you mentioned, Bruce, you know, especially over the last few months, and in particular, over the last month. You know, Pakistan's attention really is elsewhere, and focused on the climate disaster, in terms of flooding that it's dealing with. And the humanitarian crisis within its borders now.

So, I want to turn now to U.S. policy, and we have about 15 minutes left, so I'm going to start weaving in audience questions on this, as well. U.S. policy toward the Taliban over the last year and going forward. You know, what are the options here. And just by way of opening, I will say that, you know, what we were sort of told, you know, at the point of the withdrawal, that we had economic leverage over the Taliban, and that we could use this economic leverage, you know, the cutting off of aid, the imposition of sanctions, as the tool to try to get the Taliban to moderate, does not seem to have worked. As Vanda outlined, you know, the Taliban has not moderated, you know, it's sort of still authoritarian, dogmatic, and, you know, decision making being driven basically by (inaudible). And so, you know, I want to, sort of, weave in one audience question here, which came in a few days

ago. How can one promote economic development without supporting the Taliban? Essentially, you know, what -- how can U.S. policy, sort of, deal with the situation as it is, as we have made out, and, you know, this question of, whether sort of, in particular, economic policy is just hurting the Taliban, or is it hurting the Afghan people? You know, what are the options, and is this a sustainable equilibrium? You know, U.S. is the largest provider of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, the U.N. launched its largest-ever appeal for any single country in, you know, in March this year, collected over $2 billion for Afghanistan, that has largely staved off the worst of the humanitarian crisis. But humanitarian aid is just a band-aid. What is sort of long-term strategy towards the Taliban, towards Afghanistan, that the West and the U.S. in particular can follow? And I'm going to go to Vanda first, then Wes, then Bruce on this, and then hopefully, you know, weave in one audience question at the end.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: Well, I think that we sort of misplaced our focus on how to deal with the economic and humanitarian situations by focusing on does this help or hurt the Taliban. To some extent, it's inevitable, because U.S. and international counterterrorism financing laws, as well as the sanctions on Taliban demand that legally no aid or material support can go to sanctions and designated entities. That has repercussions, not just for international aid, that has -- such as reserves that have been held in the United States, there is also significant repercussions for investors, private investors, private financial banks who fear that if they allow money to come in in some form, then they will be charged at some point, perhaps in the next administrations, or by a private group of citizens, they will be charged with supporting -- violating counterterrorism laws, which carries very, very significant repercussions. So, there is this tremendous legal bind that is really limiting how aid can be delivered to the country. And it's very emblematic of the legal bind that the post-9/11 counterterrorism regime created. We see, on a smaller scale, same problem in country after country that is struggling with terrorism.

Back away from the legal issue, there is the, sort of, political dimension.

The reality is there is no way to escape from the fact that, if less fewer people are dying out of starvation, there is probably less resentment against the Taliban. That, however, should -- in my view, should not imply in any way that we should not be trying to save people from dying from starvation. There is humanitarian aid coming in, the humanitarian aid needs to go around the Taliban, and use (inaudible) on the ground who had a really harrowing job had these strict rules of engagements with which they can operate to stay in context -- to stay in compliance with the counterterrorism context.

However, those who say, then there should be denial of aid, whether humanitarian or development, that can be made legal, I would counter that preventing that aid coming in doesn't break the regime standard. We have many examples of regimes like the (inaudible) regime, like the Mugabe regime, like North Korea, like Iran, facing very severe economic sanctions that tank the economy and the edge the regime can crumple on (phonetic).

So, while compliance with the legal requirements and the counterterrorism of financing laws is essential and a big bind on policy. The hope that deprivation will topple the Taliban regime is in my view fully misguided. People who are starving will not rebel.

MS. AFZAL: Wes, over to you on this question of policy towards the Taliban, you know, economic or otherwise.

MR. MORGAN: On the economic question, I'm going to defer to Bruce and Vanda, it's not my area. On the counterterrorism issue, I mean, I think, you know, the question going forward is, how effective can U.S. counterterrorism operations be at locating and striking al-Qaida. We saw, obviously, the Zawahiri operation this summer, seemed to provide a promising indicator that the United States can find and strike al-Qaida targets, but as Vanda alluded to earlier, I think, how much of that was a U.S. intelligence success, how much of that was a result of bad miscalculation on the part of the Taliban and al-Qaida that may not be replicated, I don't know. The United States put a lot of planning into what its counterterrorism options would look like in a post-U.S. military Afghanistan, but all of those

options were predicated on the idea that there would still be a friendly government in power, that there would be surrogate forces within the Afghan military that would continue to gather intelligence about al-Qaida as they fought the Taliban on the battlefield.

You know, some elements of those surrogate forces still exist within the national resistance front. How effective they are outside their very limited area of influence in the North, I think, is a big open question, as is, you know, whether al-Qaida will learn from its mistake this past summer in allowing Zawahiri to, you know, exist, almost in the open in Kabul, and reup its operational security measures, return to tried and true tactics that made it so hard to find during the many years -- made its leaders so hard to find during the many years preceding Zawahiri strike. You know, I think we'll have to see.

And those are really some of the factors that will underpan, you know, whether the United States prosecutes further counterterrorism operations of the kind that it did inside Afghanistan this summer.

MR. RIEDEL: I would defer to Vanda on the business of economic assistance, I think she summed it up quite well.

What is striking to me is that the year after the withdrawal, we have so little American interest in the entire region, very little American leadership in the entire region. We at least meet with the Taliban in Doha from time to time, but we have virtually no engagement with the government of Pakistan. President Biden never spoke to Imran Khan when he was prime minister, and he has not spoken to Shehbaz Sharif, either. And it's particularly striking, at a moment when Pakistan is undergoing a climate disaster of unprecedented proportions, and the president of the United States doesn't call the prime minister of Pakistan, a president who calls himself a climate believer, and who wants to do something about climate, has even set up a minister of Climate Affairs in fact with John Kerry, and yet we're doing very little engagement with Pakistan.

As you have written about, Madiha, this is really baffling. Why aren't we engaging with the Pakistani government, not just on climate change, but on a whole

question of Afghanistan? The principal conclusion of my so-called AfPak report -- and I did not come up with the name AfPak, someone else did -- was that you can't deal with the question of Afghanistan without engaging at the highest level with the government of Pakistan over a sustained period of time. In his first volume of his memoirs, Barack Obama makes that point very, very clear. And yet, here we are in 2022, not engaging with Pakistan, not just on Afghanistan, but on virtually every issue in the region. It's a strategic blunder that I think is quite unfortunate, and which will sooner or later have very serious consequences. It's not too late, I'm sure the Shehbaz Sharif government will be very eager to engage with the United States, with the general assembly coming up next month we have the perfect opportunity to get Shehbaz to Washington, as well as New York, and I would hope the administration would seize this opportunity in order to begin a high-level dialogue with Islamabad.

MS. AFZAL: Bruce, as you mentioned, there hasn't been any engagement from the White House since President Biden came into power, but just over the weekend, USAID administrator Samantha Power was in Pakistan, and the U.S. has given $50 million in aid for flood affectees, but I think this is -- this does require, you know, I think more resources, as well as higher-level engagement. On the -- you know, on the question of, sort of, economics, and engaging with -- with the Taliban on, you know, the unfreezing of reserves, you know, I think, just one thing I'll mention and Vanda has addressed this in more detail, just one thing I'll mention is, you know, when there is a question of creative solutions to try to use the reserves to insert some liquidity into the Afghan economy without benefiting the Taliban directly, every time there are sort of discussions that are being had with the U.S. government and other governments on this question with the Taliban, you know, something or the other comes up in terms of Taliban decision-making that kind of halts the process or stalls it. You know, last month it was Zawahiri being found in Kabul, being killed in Kabul, you know, and sort of it makes it politically unfeasible for the U.S. really to do more. You know, six months ago, it was the decision on girl schooling. But I'll stop there on that. We

have about five minutes left, there are two questions, you know, that we received from the audience that I want to bring up here, and whoever can jump in or wants to jump in on responses, just, you know, for a minute or two, that would be great.

So, the first is kind of a larger-picture question, which is, how likely is it that lessons learned from Afghanistan will be relevant to future conflicts the U.S. engages in, given how different the circumstances may be? You know, how the sort of applicability of lessons learned, that's the first question.

And then the second question comes that's a more specific question, about how the panelists view the recent Islamic State Khorasan ISKP claimed attack on the Russian Embassy in Kabul last week. This is the first attack on a diplomatic mission since the Taliban's takeover. What does this mean, what does this portend? So, over to whoever wants to jump in those questions over the next couple of minutes.

MR. MORGAN: I'll jump in on the first one briefly. I think it's easy, and the United States military may fall prey to this tendency, to look at Afghanistan and then look at Ukraine, and then think, well we're in a whole new era of warfare, you know, back to high-intensity conflict, something like that. But to do that, that would lose sight of the fact that, in many cases, the future conflicts the United States will be involved in are the current conflicts that the United States remains involved in, in Somalia, in Yemen, in Syria, in the Sahel, where, I think, the lessons of Afghanistan remain very, very relevant.

You know, U.S. forces have gone back into Somalia after briefly departing, and, you know, you can see over the past five years in Somalia, very often situations where the lessons of the early years of Afghanistan would be relevant, you know, about not allowing yourself to be, you know, played as a proxy by your own proxies, used in situations where, you know, U.S. forces or air strikes are being used to settle disputes, intelligence is being misrepresented to you. And the broader lessons about security assistance. I think one of the lessons of Afghanistan for the U.S. military is that it leaned far too heavily on building armies in its own image. You know, in ways that I discussed earlier, but also in the

way where the U.S. military focused very heavily in Afghanistan on creating a constellation of elite special operations units that, in many ways, sucked away talent and resources from the larger conventional force, making it brittle and susceptible to the kind of collapse that we saw over the past few years, and especially last year.

You see the same tendency almost everywhere that the United States has engaged in in security assistance and advising. You see it in Somalia, where U.S. forces are so heavily invested in the Danab special operations brigade, but largely disengaged from the larger Somali national army. So, I think I would bear in mind the degree to which future conflicts are the conflicts that the United States still remains engaged in, in low-intensity wars in Africa and the Middle East.

MS. FELBAB-BROWN: I would reiterate what I had said that directly connects with Wes's comments, namely that the same reasons why we lost in Afghanistan are reasons why counterinsurgent forces, whether they are the Wagner Group, whether they are a combination of Western support, or (inaudible) and random forces are struggling in Mozambique, Somalia, Niger, Mali. You know, take your pick across the whole region.

There is fundamental (inaudible) alignment between the objectives of Western counterinsurgency assistance and the objectives of local partner governments, who often do not want to have the conflict ended. They certainly don't want to have the conflict ended if they would require that their change, their parochial, corrupt, rapacious, predatory, exclusionary ways, and move to a rule that is beyond their creed, there is more about accountability and more about sharing access to resources. As long as there's an external intervener that suppresses conflict enough that it doesn't pose problems to the capital, and they can continue with that mafia-like rule, they are perfectly comfortable.

And there is no one yet, whether it's the Chinese (phonetic) ambition to be intersecting, to be putting itself forward as the negotiator, mediator, in these African conflicts, whether it is the Wagner Group, it pretends to be doing anything other than sectoring strategic and resource access to Russia. Or the much more accountable, much more

governance-focused Western efforts, we haven't resolved that.

One comment on the Russian attacks, some people have been suggesting that this is a game-changer in Afghanistan. I do not believe so. There are many Afghanistan diaspora who are asking constantly if there is a hit on the Western embassy in Central Asia, will the United States invade and topple the Taliban. And I repeat, you need to have a different line.

MR. RIEDEL: I'll be very brief, Madiha. As Bobby Gates who spent a lot of time working on the Afghanistan problem, said about the lesson he learned about the Wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, that in the future if any future secretary of defense ever recommends to a president, engaging in a ground war in Asia, that secretary of defense should have his head examined.

This is not something that is easy and is not something we have done well. From Vietnam to Afghanistan this has been a legacy of failure. Let's not engage in any more out of area missions with large ground forces on the Asian or African continents.

MS. AFZAL: Thank you, Bruce. Thank you, Wes. Thank you, Vanda.

You know – for an excellent, new, and sobering conversation. And there will be more conversations on Afghanistan, in particular on focusing on the economic crisis, focusing on women's rights, and girls' education, etc. going forward.

But today I want to thank our excellent panel, Wes, Vanda, Bruce, on behalf of the Foreign Policy Program at Brookings and the Center for Middle East Policy. And thank you to our audience for sending in excellent questions. Thanks to everyone for joining us.

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