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WHERE ARE US-CHINA RELATIONS HEADED?

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FIRESIDE CONVERSATION:

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D-Connecticut, U.S. House of Representatives

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HASS: Good morning, everyone. My name is Ryan Hass. I'm the director of the China Center here at the Brookings Institution. And it is an honor for me to welcome Congressman Himes to join us today for our conversation. Our conversation today is part of a multiyear collaboration with the Center for Strategic and International Studies. Our collaboration with CSA has sought to determine where there might be benefit to coordinate with China during an era of strategic competition. The project aims to both look backwards, but also look forwards at where there may be common purpose and common cause between the United States and China in the future. As part of these efforts, we have benefited from the insights of members of Congress. We had Congressman now Senator-elect Andy Kim join us last year to talk through some of these issues. And today, we benefit from having Congressman Himes with us.

Congressman Himes has represented Connecticut's Fourth District since 2009, and he is at the forefront of addressing many of our most pressing national security challenges. He currently serves as the ranking member of the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. His leadership has helped shape the nation's policies on critical national security matters, including cybersecurity, global competition and the regulation of emerging technologies. He has agreed that it is okay for me to be inconsiderate in introducing him so that we can maximize every minute that we have with him to talk through these issues. But before we turn to substance, let me just point out two other things.

This man sitting to my right is a graduate of Harvard University. He was a Rhodes scholar at Oxford. He brings a wealth of expertise and dedication to his role representing his constituents. I'd also like to thank the Hewlett Foundation and the Gates Foundation for their generous support for today's event and for the broader project. So with that out of the way, let's get to business. As you know, a new administration will be entering in January as well as a new Congress. From your vantage point on the House Permanent Select Committee on Intelligence. What do you think will be the defining challenges and opportunities shaping the US-China relationship on a forward-looking basis?

HIMES: Yeah. Thank you, Ryan, and a big thank you to Brookings and CSIS for putting this together. I think these conversations are really important and really important right now as we're about to see the transition that you asked about. Let me answer your specific question and expand on it a little bit.

The opposite way that elected officials usually like to think. Your question was from the standpoint of intelligence, you know, what's likely to change? And I would say I get accused sometimes of being dovish on China. I reject that. But because I just my argument is that I think we should be a little bit more sophisticated, a little bit more nuanced, a little bit more negotiation oriented than the rhetoric, certainly that you hear where I work. But generally speaking. So but I would you asked about the Intelligence Committee. You know, I suspect we'll talk a little bit about typhoon, you know, along with the treatment of the Uyghurs, along with the, you know, unprofessional naval and airborne activities in the South China Sea, the activities of the play of the Chinese Communist Party organs and affiliated entities messing around in our networks is intolerable. And what we're seeing now was and this is not a surprise. So Salt Typhoon, I think it was a little surprising only in its magnitude scale and persistence.

But that's an area where we need to make it very clear to the Chinese that at a minimum, at a minimum, we need to come to some agreement about networks that will not be violated, critical infrastructure. I would hope that we would go beyond that minimum, though, to say that also, by the way, we're really good at this too, and we will uptick our activities. Yeah, we're actually there's a lot of things that Chinese do that we don't do. We? We, we I was going to use the word never. I will use the word never. We never break into commercial networks to steal IP. That, of course, is, you know, Monday for the Chinese. And we are much more, I would say, careful and perhaps even dovish about our cyber operations. We could change that. And so I think the next president has an opportunity to really hit them hard in that particular areas, even as even as there's areas where I think we should maybe think about being more dovish.

HASS: Okay. So you started out talking about Salt Typhoon. I think that many of our members of our audience are familiar with the cyber incident, which is named Salt Typhoon. But can you tell us a little bit more about the nature of the incident, the scope of the incident, but also as a member of Congress, do you think that we have adequate laws and regulations in place to prevent and deal with these types of incidents?

HIMES: Yeah. So let me start with the second part of the question, which is easier to answer. The first part of the question. I got to be a little careful because a lot of what a lot of what we know is not in the public domain. But the second part of the question is a very easy question. We are in the early 20th century. Frankly, with respect to the mechanisms that we have to work with the private sector, because Salt Typhoon was a private sector breach to very quickly respond. And it's not just Salt Typhoon, right? I was going out of my mind during the Colonial Pipeline breach because we dragged every senior ice person in front of the committee and they knew it. They knew nothing because there was no requirement, if you will, that around truly critical infrastructure and, you know, colonial pipelines was gasoline. You know, Verizon and the telecommunications companies are the phone calls of the United States president. Right. By any stretch of the imagination, critical infrastructure.

And it's this very, you know, polite voluntary system around the most essential things that we need and do. And it will be a fight, you know, but and the companies will say, hey, look, we're the victims here. And we're gonna say, look, there's metaphors out there. There's analogies, right? You know, the airlines, the government is very, very much in the airlines business. You know, when a screwdriver is left in a fuel tank on an aircraft, guess what? It lands. It gets reported. The FAA is informed. This is it is challenging politically. But there's lots of analogies about how we need to drag this network world into the 21st century, if for no other reason for national security. The first part of your question, you asked for the contours. I'm going to be a little bit a little bit crisp on this on this answer.

But let's just say, in my opinion, is probably the biggest breach in terms of the scale. It's persistence, it's collection capability that I've ever seen. And you can say, well, is it as bad as Edward Snowden? Edward Snowden was a very different thing, right? He stole a bunch of stuff and he gave it to the Russians and very different thing. But in terms of its scale, this is about as big as anything that we have ever seen. And, you know, my job is oversight. I can't get into sort of what we knew when, but I look at what we knew when and said. The second part of your question, we need to do a lot better.

HASS: Yeah. And will your committee have jurisdiction over developing new laws and regulations to address these issues?

HIMES: We will share that, of course, with some weird combination of judiciary and the Energy and Commerce Committee. And we saw this before. I can't I'll get the date wrong, but I think it was 20, 2011, 2012 that we passed the first, you know, we called it. Are not to be confused with sister. And you know, we ultimately ended up getting legislation done that created this largely discretionary partnership between the three letter agencies and including FBI and DHS and everything and the network companies. But that obviously needs we need to we need to step that up. And, you know, it's going to be challenging, right? Because there's I remember that legislative fight. You know, there's personally identifiable information at stake. If Verizon wants to transfer a whole bunch of malware to a three-letter agency, it's almost certain that there's US person communications or metadata in there. So I'm not saying this is easy, but I am saying it's beatable.

HASS: So we've established that cyber issues will be a big piece of business for the incoming administration. 119th Congress. What other major issues relating to China do you think will be on the docket for the incoming Congress?

HIMES: Yeah. So, you know, the Republicans have the trifecta. So you're asking the wrong you're asking the wrong guy. But I think I've been watching this long enough to, I think, be able to at least trace some contours here. Very interesting, as we were talking about before. Right. Because if you just listen to the president elect's bluster, for lack of a better word, and if you sort of think about the core tenets of MAGA, you would say, yeah, those 60% tariffs plus 10%, they're common. You would say, you know, of the what do we do with 760 billion and trade three quarters in our direction and one quarter in the other direction. And the president is very president elect has always been he's had this sort of mercantilist view of trade balances.

You know, MAGA orthodoxy would suggest, holy smokes, you know, we're going to see a massive 60% tariffs. I don't need to tell you what that does to the US economy and inflation is tough. On the other hand, he has appointed traditional, largely appointed traditional James Baker conservatives to the role of secretary of State to. You know, it's interesting, right, that it wasn't Lighthizer and Grenell that are there. It is folks that I would characterize as more traditional kind of James Baker Republicans.

And of course, the ambassador designate is a businessperson who did business. So I allowed myself, I don't usually do this, and I never do it on domestic issues, but I allowed myself a note of optimism on the next Trump administration in foreign policy, because if that adds up to I guess, what if that adds up to I was going to say, this is the opposite of what Teddy Roosevelt said was a good idea. Right? You know, quiet voice and big stick, you know, if that adds up to a fairly hawkish approach, but a skepticism of kinetic conflict. I might be all right.

HASS: So, Congressman, we were talking a moment ago. There are ebbs and flows in the US-China relationship. There have been eras where there has been more cooperation in areas where there has been more competition. As you sort of look back at the history of the US-China relationship, are there historical precedents that you find appealing or ones that you think we should avoid as we think about the US-China relationship?

HIMES: Yeah. Yeah, a super interesting question. And we've got some experts here that I'll be very humble about because I'm not a Sinologist. I mean, I sort of I'm a practitioner, but my own take on this, which is sort of limited to praxis as opposed to theory, is that I'm sure like all of history, this echoes, you know, but I'm a I'm with Kevin Rudd, who I think is one of the smartest people in DC on China. And, you know, at whatever age he has got himself a Ph.D. on the subject of China and wrote that book. You know, he says what we are seeing right now is a return to ideology with Xi deciding that the politics will be Leninist and the economics will be Marxist. And I see, you know, from my sort of, you know, nonacademic standpoint reason to say that that's actually a pretty good interpretation of what's happening.

So, you know, the return of ideology at the expense of commercial pragmatism, right? I mean, there's not a business person on the planet, certainly not in China, that didn't look at Jack Ma and say, I don't want that to happen to me. So this return to ideology, I don't know. The experts will tell us whether that's what Mao did in 1972. The point is that it's a huge policy shift, right, Because guys like me used to be very comfortable with the notion that at the core of Chinese thinking, leadership, thinking was pragmatism, meaning we don't like what's happening with the Uyghurs, and there's lots of complaints that we have, but fundamentally, it's pragmatic.

We don't have that confidence anymore. Now, if you're me, you think you know, unpopular thing to say, but the economic growth in China over a generation has been nothing short of miraculous for the Chinese people.

HASS: Right.

HIMES: And you say to yourself, wait a minute, that happened because of free markets and international trade. Like so isn't the core of the political standing of the CCP? Exactly the opposite of what they seem to be doing today, which is rejecting the however you want to characterize it. You know, US led global order. And but nonetheless, I mean, you have to be I have to be careful about that kind of thinking because ideology has reasserted itself in a big way. So if you're me, you think, of course he's not going to invade Taiwan because that would result in a 10% decline, according to Rand in in Chinese GDP. Well, you know, maybe not. Maybe that is a commercial price worth paying for this, you know, nationalist achievement.

HASS: Former Indo-Pak Commander Davidson has identified 2027 as a critical date in the cross-strait context, a potential date at which the Chinese military could be prepared to launch a military invasion against Taiwan. How do you think about future dates and timelines as an indicator that we should be focused on?

HIMES: I'm skeptical, frankly, of that statement, which is everywhere. You know, Xi ordered the PLA to be ready to invade Taiwan in 2027. First of all, it may not happen. Secondly, if it does happen, there's no way the Chinese are going to know that it happened. Right. Just ask Vladimir Putin how predictable invasions are, even in a neighboring country is much less across 100 miles of blue water. So, you know, it may not happen. You know, the Chinese are consistently missing their recruiting goals. It's not a happy thing to be in the PLA if you're a young Chinese person. And like I said, you just don't know if the answer is yes, we have achieved that objective. It's also and again, here's where I have to sort of revert to my, remember, ideology may trump pragmatism.

Also feels like a really dumb way to go. Right. You know, and I don't you know, there are islands that are claimed by Taiwan that are two miles off the coast of China. You could implement a blockade. You know what? If you invade Taiwan, what happens? You may lose what, but, you know, you may lose. B, you may reduce the place to smoking rebel, in which case, what have you really achieved economically? You know, you'd have incredible brain drain.

You've risked a nuclear war with the United States. I presume you destabilize the region for a generation. So it's just sort of you know, I kind of I don't want to say I rejected it. This is the kind of thing that hawks in the House say. And I'm supposed to be really scared by that rather than saying, okay, well, you know, how do we how do we take the steps to make that eventuality less likely? And those steps can range from let's keep or, you know, really accelerate the deterrence by arming Taiwan to let's stress those areas where there are deep common interests with the Chinese to make that less likely.

HASS: And what would you identify as some of those areas where there's commonality of interest between the United States and China? If you were on a forward-looking basis and you wanted to see the United States and China working around common challenges together more, where would you encourage greater, greater focus?

HIMES: Yeah. No, I'm glad you asked the question because. You know, again, I think there's areas and you started me very hawkish on, you know, network exploitation and that sort of thing. But it's really important as we think about here of to think about some profound common interests, some of which, of course, have been upheld by the Biden administration. Right. And so the Biden administration made not sufficient, but made real progress in working with the Chinese on fentanyl precursors. You know, the State Department rightly, I think, takes some credit for saying it's better than it was. Now, you know, it's not what we want it to be, Right. But obviously, you know, a country that is losing 80,000 Americans, you know, to addiction, to overdoses has got to put that front and center.

And, you know, they made some real progress on that. We can do more. You know, number two, I'm and I'll leave the big one for last. But artificial intelligence has always intrigued me. You know, we're all freaking out because my God, we can't audit this thing. We can't control it. We don't know where it's going to go. It's uncontrollable. It's unpredictable. You know who hates lack of control and lack of predictability more than we do the Chinese. So it feels to me like, you know, that's an area where we really ought to be putting our people together, our sort of cutting-edge research to do. And yes, there are you know, there's small gardens where we probably don't want to be sharing our, you know, you know, visual A.I. for military purposes.

But anyway, my point is that more broadly, we really ought to be working closely with the Chinese on something that I think scares them a hell of a lot. And by the way, it raises certain global issues, right? You know, it's not hard to spot somebody developing a, you know, next generation foundational model. Right. Because you burn so much. You know, you burn so much electricity in doing it. And so I think that's an area where we've common interests, pandemics and health generally learn that lesson. Big one, of course, is trade. And here's where here's where it's going to get interesting with the Trump administration. Right? I mean, where are we just, you know, shy of $800 billion in cross-border trade?

Last I checked, they you know, the Chinese are sitting on roughly $1 trillion of our treasuries. And we should at least be mindful of that. You know, if they decided to not show up at a Treasury auction, that would have implications for mortgage, more Americans, mortgage rates. So anyway, I think those are probably the big ones. But, you know, there's others, too. There's the really soft stuff. You know, let's continue carefully. Let's continue to welcome, you know, Chinese scientists to our research institutions in the hope that maybe they'll stay here, you know, that that, you know, yeah, there's other side to that. But sure. Yeah.

HASS: But you touched on the idea of a small yard and a high fence a moment ago, which is a term that members of the administration like to use. And the idea is to protect national security sensitive technology while allowing normal commerce to proceed between the United States and China. Do you think that we have that balance about right now, or would you like to see adjustments in in any direction?

HIMES: I've been a sort of grumpy critic of the Biden administration. I sort of come from a free trade philosophy. You know, I've been doing this long enough that I don't want to say pure free trade because, you know, I don't represent the Midwest, but I'm very conscious of what, you know, NAFTA and China's accession to the WTO did to our industrial base. But, you know, I've regarded this administration as protectionist, and I think that's probably a fair characterization. So I agree completely with, you know, small nanometer chips and small, which happens to be in my district. Yeah, I don't want them and I don't want to be exporting, you know, ASML lithography machines to China. So I agree completely with that. I do think that we have gone, and so, yes, I think there's a very small garden of that kind of stuff.

And but I do think that there is you know, I'm not an expert in the area, but, you know, should we have slapped as Europe is doing the same, you know, tariffs on electric vehicles? So I do think it's been exaggerated. I think this small walled garden has been bigger than it would be for my comfort. And by the way, I would add to that. So, yes, small nanometer lithography machines. We also should be and here's where I would not be a free trader, we should be very conscious of the supply lines of the critical ingredients of essential commercial or national security stuff. I mean, boy, did we learn a lesson on a commodity product masks or it turns out that when the ships weren't going, you couldn't get that. But so I hope we're way beyond that.

But, you know, the lithium and, you know, the various critical minerals, you know, the Chinese have not monopolized but have done a lot to lock up a lot of supply. And that makes me nervous, which points to an interesting topic. You know, I would start, by the way, not by shaking my fist at the Chinese because they've bought lots of bauxite and lithium around the world, but saying, holy smokes, can we please address our permitting system in the United States so that we can actually build a lithium mine in Wyoming or wherever these things are? Not in 25 years? Right. So I think we have a lot of work we can do, and the environmentalists hate that and everything else. But, you know, the environmentalists aren't going to get their climate change issue if they don't come to the table on permitting reform. So I would start there.

HASS: Congressman, I have one more question to ask you and then we'll give our audience an opportunity to pose a couple of questions to you. But as a practitioner of politics, you meet and speak with constituents all the time. How often does trying to come up and when it does come up with your constituents, what is it that's most on their minds?

HIMES: With my constituents. I have a really diverse constituency. You know, Fairfield County, Connecticut, I have everybody thinks I have extraordinarily wealthy people in my district. I do. Greenwich, Westport, New Canaan Dairy. And I also have deep poverty in my district in some of the cities. So I have a really diverse constituency by any measure. And the answer is that proactively, China never comes up, ever. Housing costs, electricity, infrastructure. The fact that it takes you, you know, at rush hour, you know, 45 minutes to drive, ten miles constant right on the left, all kinds of concerns about MAGA and Donald Trump is going to end our democracy on the right. You know, I mean, but China never comes up. Yes. Every once in a blue moon with somebody who's a member on the Council on Foreign Relations, but that's pretty rare. So, yeah, I mean, that's make of that what you will that that's the answer. And I suspect that's probably pretty typical of me of my colleagues.

HASS: Thank you for these insights. The floor is open. If anyone has a question, please raise your hand. We have microphones. I would just ask that you introduce yourself and limit yourself to a question, not a statement. If possible. We'll start with the gentleman at the break here.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: All right, Congressman, thank you very much for coming. Congressman, thank you very much for coming. My name is James Boyle. I'm a recently retired military officer. One area of cooperation we did not talk about at all was climate change. And I'm wondering if you could talk a little bit about where you see potential areas of cooperation and cooperation on an area where China has made significant progress in terms of clean battery, battery technology, electric vehicles and solar. Thank you.

HIMES: Yeah, great question. I actually should have I should have included that on my list right next to, like, pandemics. And because you're absolutely right. Look, it's super. It's big time in the world's interest to help the Chinese move away from building coal plants. Right. Which they're still doing at a

at a fairly rapid rate. You know, on the other hand. So it's very much in our interest to help. Now, the truth is I think there is probably innovative with respect to sustainable technologies, as anyone. I made a point that I'm not sure I'm skeptical of trying to of, you know, really slapping, slapping tariffs on their electric vehicles. I'd want to think that through. Right. Because I don't want them being predatory in such a way that we don't have a U.S. player in that market. But, you know, there's an example, by the way, of where climate goals can conflict with American industrial goals. And personally, I would lean into the climate goals on that particular issue. Feels to me like over time these are likely to be commoditized. Right? So this is not we're not talking about advanced chips here.

So yeah, no, I mean, I couldn't agree with you more. I understand. And I'm a little bit little bit far afield of my expertise here. But I understand that they're doing remarkable things with climate carbon capture technology, which we sort of do, but not really. And so I think that's an area of huge potential cooperation, if for no other reason, that as my Republican friends love to point out, whatever we do in this country kind of doesn't matter relative to what India and China do. And we ought to at least acknowledge that mathematically that's true. And therefore, we have an interest in how India and China are building their economies.

HASS: We have time for one more quick question. In the interest of gender parity, if there's any woman that would like to raise a question and or.

HIMES: Come up, come sit up here. Yeah, I think that with the next panel. Yeah.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Hi, my name is Jessica Baker. I work for a company called Cision. You mentioned that the Chinese hate unpredictability even more than we do. It must be very frustrating for them to deal with the unpredictability of a constantly changing U.S. executive branch leadership and the foreign policy changes that is hard to predict. So what can you tell us that you're allowed to tell us about what we know about how they plan their own foreign policy, their own engagement with U.S. across multiple agencies, multiple administrations, and how they how they might be planning to engage with the incoming administration.

HIMES: Yeah, yeah. Super interesting question. You know, the Chinese like leadership of, you know, certainly the G7 country, you know, they're pretty sophisticated in the understanding of our, of our chaotic leadership system. And I think they understand the chaos associated with democratic countries. I mean, okay, we're pretty chaotic. But, you know, Britain had two monarchs and seven prime ministers in a six-year period or whatever it was. So I think the Chinese look at democracy, and I don't think they think it's a feature. I think they think it's a bug, but they're not naive about the you know, what they probably see as chaotic nature of Democratic leadership changeovers. You know, that said, again, I think they're pretty sophisticated.

If you look back at the Trump administration there, this is something that I personally have to psychologically manage, but there's just a lot of chaff in the air. But when it comes down to actual real change, you know, the tearing up of the JCPOA was and obviously there was a pretty significant change with respect to, you know, almost unconditional support for Israel. But the point I'm trying to make is the policies don't radically change. And so I don't think the Chinese are expecting a radical change in US policy. My guess is that they've discounted the 60% plus 10% tariff thing. So anyway, I think they're probably pretty sophisticated in their understanding. They're also sophisticated enough to know, as I think most observers of Donald Trump know, that he's not a hard guy to try to pick the word here to understand, you know, and that if you're meeting Donald Trump for the first time, the first thing you do is, you know, you praise him for his stunning historical leadership and the fact that he is, without question, the most important president of the 20th.

You know, I mean, you get my point here. You know, and I think they're probably also sophisticated enough to understand that the president elect has a is drawn to strongmen. I'm avoiding the use authoritarian, but I could use anyway. I think they're pretty sophisticated in their understanding. And there may be even virtue in something that MAGA claims is virtuous. I'm never 100% sure about this, which is that the unpredictability, the fact that we're urged by his own people to take him seriously, but not literally, whatever that means, the fact that everybody, you know, certainly Sonny Perdue is probably saying 60% tariffs is an opening negotiating position. I think there may be some virtue in in the unpredictability with respect to the Chinese, because they're likely, again, being rational, sophisticated actors.

They're probably likely to create a larger buffer margin. And what they're and how they respond, how aggressively they respond. So I realize this is coming across as very optimistic, but I do actually feel some optimism about what we were talking about earlier, which is it may be true that a that a hawkish approach in a lot of regions of the world accompanied by real care around finding one's selves in in a kinetic conflict maybe may be the right answer with China and with Russia and, you know, some of the other hotspots around the world.

HASS: Well, Congressman, we started out on a tough note talking about salt, typhoon and cyber intrusions. We're ending on an optimistic note, which is a great way to close out this portion of our event. I really want to thank you for spending time with us, helping to educate us on what the world looks like from where you sit. And I wish you safe travels later today. Thank you. And we'll turn this over to our next panel. Thank you much. Thank you.

MCELWEE: That's wonderful. Welcome, everyone, to our second portion of today's event. We're fixing the gender parity. All right. Caitlin told me to call on a man if we have time for questions. So I'd like to thank the congressman again for that wonderful introduction. In this second part of our event. We're going to talk about precedence for major power collaboration. I want to briefly introduce a reintroduce the joint CSIs Brookings Project that is the premise behind all of this, behind this event today and all the work we've done. We started out with the assumption that US-China relations are in a bad place and they're not necessarily going to improve dramatically in the years ahead. There's little appetite in Washington or Beijing for collaboration on shared challenges.

And there are new political and security roadblocks to collaboration, even among non-state actors. But amid these rising and enduring frictions, we wanted to look at how the United States and China can find ways to work together on shared challenges when it's in Washington and Beijing's national interests, and particularly how non-state actors can collaborate in this new environment. And a lot of our work in this first phase of the project was looking to history here. So looking at past examples of Great Power collaboration. At first, we did a case study on US Soviet collaboration on smallpox eradication in the Cold War.

We looked at US Chinese efforts, joint efforts on the Ebola response in West Africa in 2014, US Chinese collaboration on HIV, Aids prevention in the early 2000s. And then Lefler, the preeminent Cold War historian, penned an essay for us on how the US and Soviet Union managed to collaborate on discrete issues like strategic arms control across the Cold War. We then did a live case study of collaboration in the form of a track two with Chinese counterparts looking at the issue of food security or climate smart agriculture. We chose this issue in part because it's thorny enough to really test our emerging assumptions here. Beijing has prioritized food security and food self-sufficiency in in a more contentious environment. Chinese farmland purchases have come under scrutiny in the United States, but it is an area where leaders on both sides of this relationship have expressed an interest in collaboration.

So, today we're going to discuss some of the findings from our historical case studies and then also some emerging findings from our, from our track two as well to discuss these topics. I'm really delighted to be joined by a fantastic panel here. We have Caroline Smith DeWaal, who's a Senior Associate in the Global Food and Water Security Program at CSIS, was previously at the Global Alliance for Improved Nutrition Game, where she focused on food safety and addressing malnutrition. And at the US Food and Drug Administration, where she worked with foreign governments to ensure bilateral alignment on food national safety systems. She's also a 2024 winner of the International Association for Food Protection's Food Safety Award for contributions to the field of food safety.

I wanted to mention that Nellie Bristol, who's a Senior Associate in a Global Health Policy Center at CSIS and a Global Health Analyst, writer and expert and editor with expertise in global disease eradication, global health security and pandemic preparedness and response. She's also the author of our inaugural case study on US-Soviet smallpox eradication during the Cold, Cold War. And then finally, my friend and colleague, Caitlin Welsh, who is director of our Global Food and Water Security Program at CSIS, plenty of prior senior USG experience, including at the NSC and the National Economic Council as director for global economic Engagement with responsibility for the G7 and G20 and as Acting Director of the U.S. Department of State's Office of Global Food Security. So welcome, Caroline, Nellie and Caitlin, so glad to have you here.

We're going to begin by focusing or reflecting a little bit on the past and what we've learned from the case study for this project. We're super glad to have Nellie here because she did so much independent research for us and wrote this fantastic case study on how Moscow and Washington managed to come together during the height of hostilities in the Cold War and work on a shared concern, smallpox eradication now. Tell us about some of your research, some of your findings. What made this possible? What were practical mechanisms by which the two superpowers worked together?

BRISTOL: Right. Thanks, Lily. So smallpox, an ancient scourge that killed millions over the course of history, was a particular concern in Russia, where it also had killed millions and became very, very involved in vaccinations and ensuring that its population was vaccinated. And in vaccine development and came up with a freeze-dried version that was a heat stable version that was that could be used in a variety of settings. And then during the Soviet era, got involved in large scale vaccination of its population and was able to eliminate smallpox in its borders in 1936. And it was actually Russia that or the Soviets who proposed global smallpox eradication at the World Health Assembly, the governing body for the for the WHO in 1958. And it didn't get it even though it was it was approved. Russia actually had or the Soviets had dropped out of WHO for a while.

And this might sound familiar to some of the things that could go on in the future here. But then came back in and they came up with this proposal to eradicate smallpox globally as kind of their big entrance back into the organization and to demonstrate their technology and their prowess in medical technology. So even though it was approved, didn't take off initially at the WHO, the US was not a huge supporter initially. It was involved in an attempted malaria eradication program with WHO that was not going particularly well. And WHO was nervous about getting involved in another eradication program given what was going on with malaria. But eventually things realigned. The U.S. had some smallpox programs going on in other countries, in other regions in Africa, and had come up with some really effective mechanisms for vaccinating large scale populations. And so CDC was involved with that.

And for the U.S., as the Vietnam War kind of dragged on and the US was looking for ways to bolster its image globally. And it was the, you know, the hearts and minds campaigns that were going on between both of the countries, between the Soviets and the US. The US became more interested in smallpox eradication and working through the WHO on that. So ended up putting in a lot of money and personnel. And the Soviets came up with a lot of the vaccination, a lot of the vaccine that was used for the program. But the key point to all this, I mean, was sort of enlightened self-interest on both of their parts that that pushed them toward this this program. But also the key element was so and having an international organization where those self-interests could be expressed, that they could take on a global program and they could involve and as you may know, global eradication of a disease is incredibly hard.

The polio program has been trying to it has been stumbling along for a couple of decades now and, you know, kind of moving in the wrong direction right now. So it's it is incredibly complex and involves all countries of the world. It involves very a lot of focus and so and a lot of money and a lot of sort of, you know, short term upfront costs that eventually will provide benefit. But it's you have to kind of keep everybody on board and rowing in the same direction. So really difficult. WHO served as the focal point for bringing that all together and for involving not just the Soviets and the US, but countries around the world which had to bolster their own immunization programs to the level where they could eliminate smallpox within their own borders, but also to for the for the US for the program to be able to go into places everywhere in the world. You had to vaccinate everywhere in the world, places that don't have health care at all. So really complex.

And but it was WHO where the where the program could be expressed and also where the operation could serve as the operational focus. So I think it's really and from my standpoint as a public health. Isn't that really an argument for the international system and WHO in particular, as a as a place where these issues can be discussed and where the world can come together and move in the same direction for something that is a common a common threat. So climate change and pandemics, you know, with COVID so is instrumental in bolstering developing country health systems, you know, disease surveillance.

That's this is another enlightened self-interest supporting that is another enlightened self-interest subject for us. And so I guess the argument of my paper is we need organizations like WHO for it to be able to come together and focus on these issues.

MCELWEE: Great. Thank you, Nellie. And I just want to highly recommend Nellie's case study. She does an excellent job of showing how collaboration on smallpox was not an altruistic endeavor by either superpower. It was firmly rooted in the national self-interest of each superpower and geopolitical interests of each superpower. So I think that's worth emphasizing here as we're thinking about US-China relations and where we are, that this can be in the national interests of each country as well. So you mentioned international organizations. I want to turn to Caroline, who has lots of expertise in international organizations, but in a different space, more in the food safety and climate, smart agriculture space. You have extensive experience on when it comes to international collaboration here from Gain from the FDA. What lessons are you taking away from that experience?

DEWAAL: So we I have been as part of the CODEX Alimentarius like broad community for several decades and. The important thing is to have multilateral platforms where experts can get together and develop consensus. CODEX has really formed a foundation for food standards, which are really important for trade internationally, and so it's been operating for about 60 years. China is a member. I believe Russia is a member. I mean, basically it's got hundreds of countries that are members and they meet. They meet like many times during the year to discuss the food standards as they come through the process. The important thing about CODEX is they really bring their subject matter experts. So each country, I mean, some countries, some political people, but for the most part, countries are sending their international experts in different topics which are under consideration.

And I really do believe that these kind of multilateral platforms can serve the basis for bilateral discussions between different countries. I even observed once, many years ago to countries that were at war, basically where bombs were flying and the experts were actually meeting and discussing the topics at the meeting. So it really is a safe space for countries to do this. I do want to just mention that last week we actually got a paper approved at the commission level for four domestic markets in the global South. But China actually approved.

There were 23 countries that spoke up in support of this paper. But China was one of them. So it shows that the issue of food standards and even domestic food markets is really important to China.

MCELWEE: Fantastic. Thank you so much. We want to ask for your thoughts on our on our convening as well. But first, I want to turn to Caitlin. We recently conducted this live case study of collaboration, and it was, I think, three and a half days in beautiful Bellagio, Italy. And we got us experts together with Chinese experts to talk about roadblocks and opportunities for collaboration in climate smart agriculture. What lessons, what observations did you have about that experience You played a pivotal role in in Hurting us all and making sure we care. We came out with some concrete ideas. What were your some of your observations about opportunities and challenges for collaboration in this space?

WELSH: Sure. Great question and thanks for having me today. We did convene U.S. and Chinese experts for multi-day discussions earlier this year. On the US side, we had former government officials from NSC, US, TR, USDA, State Department, FDA research institutes, universities, other research institutes, the private sector. On the Chinese side, we had former Chinese representatives, the U.N. fellow Chinese researchers, private sector representatives and others. So really excellent group of folks for this track to convening. And we were exploring safe harbors for collaboration between United States and China on issues of food security in agriculture. And out of this three-day convening, a number of specific potential areas for collaboration emerged. And for background, I'll give just a quick overview of what they are. We talked about the potential to collaborate on challenges regarding water, so increasing agricultural production in water stressed regions.

We talked about the importance of reducing food loss and waste, which is a major challenge both in China and the United States with climate change implications and also implications for food security, nutrition. We talked about the potential benefits of collaborating on creating mutually agreed standards for trade with regard to climate issues. Seeing that issues like carbon emissions and greenhouse gas emissions and the potential to sequester carbon in soil through agriculture. Those things are emerging in trade agreements and trade obstacles. So we have talked about the potential benefits of U.S. and China agreeing to those standards.

Talked about alternative proteins, both for human consumption and for animal feed. With China prioritizing those in its five-year food security plan. And finally, we talked about the importance of increasing transparency in global agriculture, market issues for the benefit of market actors around the world. So we talked about a whole host of things under this broad umbrella of climate smart agriculture and a number of areas of promise emerge and also some areas of some pitfalls too. So in terms of promise, one thing that was very, very apparent was the enthusiasm, enthusiasm among participants to actually start to enact this collaboration. We had really top tier experts from the United States and China in the room, and they were ready not just to talk about these, but to get these into action, into implementation, recognizing the need for the benefits of these collaborations.

We were having these discussions at a time when there was vocalized and very high-level support by the United States government and by the Chinese government. For example, in the United States, President Biden had spoken on a number of occasions publicly about the potential benefits of U.S. collaboration with China on these issues. Secretary Biden has done the same and the Chinese ambassador to the United States had also done the same. So there is a lot of high-level expression of interest and collaboration for these purposes. So it was that it gave even more purpose to these discussion discussions and that and then finally, in terms of promises that there just is need for expertise among two of the world's top agricultural powerhouses to address challenges that affect countries around the world, there's potential for us to benefit from each other's expertise and experience addressing these challenges and also the potential for third countries to benefit. So we were bolstered by this, by this great need around the world. Pitfalls come in the form of a few things that were evident in the conversation, but also since then.

One is the trend in educational exchange between countries, because it was very, very evident that the fact that so many participants on the US side had worked in China spoke Chinese, were familiar with Chinese culture. And on the reverse side of the flipside, Chinese participants had studied in the US received advanced degrees here. The fact that we could speak a common language was really, really beneficial for collab for our own exchange. And we see trends in educational exchange going in decreasing. So fewer Chinese students studying in the US, fewer US students studying in China.

And also right now in the US, we're seeing that there's in particular on Capitol Hill opposition to just I see a knee jerk opposition to anything regarding China with regard to agriculture, in large part because of fears over Chinese purchase of used US agricultural land. That's not the topic of this panel. Can you answer questions about that if necessary? But I think in large part those fears are overblown. But that can be the basis of this reactionary opposition to potential collaboration. And finally, an observation that this is this is neither a pitfall nor a promise, but there really is no track for such collaboration in the last in the last decade, there is the US-China strategic and economic dialog under which the governments actually did agree to collaborate on agriculture and food security in third countries, and that was started to be implemented but then the S&P went away. And so there's no longer a government to government track for this collaboration to happen. That actually opens up opportunities for collaboration at other levels or among researchers at among NGOs and private sector and other levels. But in even in the absence of a willingness between governments to collaborate. So I'll pause there.

MCELWEE: Now that's great, and I really appreciate you pointing out the pitfalls as well, because one thing we try to do at the convening was start our conversations with a discussion of political realities in Beijing and Washington that would shape anything we came up, came away with, and then we put those aside for a little bit and let the experts dream and brainstorm. And then we brought them back in at the end because, you know, a per Nellie's case study and US-Soviet collaboration, we need to think about the national interests of each country. That needs to be loud and clear in this environment for this to happen, for any sort of collaboration to have to have any legs. But Caroline, I want to ask you the same question. You were there with us in Malaysia. What surprised you about the convening any challenges, any points of optimism?

DEWAAL: So I think the first lesson kind of that I took away from our convening in Blasio is the need for safe pathways for communication between the government. So it's like, how do you create the environment and also the impetus to make it safe for these experts to get together. And that's where, like my first example of CODEX, I mean, it's convened by the WHO, and FAO is recognized by the World Trade Organization. So it's got a will and it's 60 years old or, you know, most of the committees. So it's been operating for a long time.

So it's safe. So with respect to climate smart agriculture, there's a lot of opportunities. I mean, the congressman mentioned carbon capture technologies and learning from each other on those types of technologies are urgently needed. And one thing I did take away, I think for the first time at the convening was the idea that food security is food security, that we can't it's not just about feeding. People. It's about feeding the animals that feed people. And that becomes very important when you look across trade in the US. We have a lot of farmers who rely on the ingredients both for human food but also for animal feed. That is very vital and it's vital to our farmers, it's vital to Chinese consumers and farmers and food producers.

So thinking through like what are how do we create that kind of safe space? And that's the challenge, but also the opportunity. So the discussion and Caitlin did an amazing job kind of outlining where we all came out in terms of our broad thinking about what we could focus on. But the bottom line is there were many, many spots where climate smart agriculture could be addressed. But again, I wouldn't I would encourage that we not look at just like a one off. That that we think through that pathway to that communication that is accepted by the governments and that allows different issues to move through a process.

MCELWEE: That's great. And I think a theme of our conversation so far has been safe harbors for communication among experts and the important role historically that international institutions have played in enabling that sort of cooperation. Nellie, I want to turn to you here, because you're an expert in the WTO, and we know that international institutions are plagued by a whole host of challenges in this more contentious environment with gridlock. For example, in the UN Security Council, with the United States pulling back from the WTO, when we look at the WTO. Can you tell us a little bit about the scope for continued collaboration in this organization?

BRISTOL: Yeah, I mean, it is a little tricky with the administration coming in, which had tried to withdraw the US or proposed withdrawing the US from WHO. And I mean, WHO has its problems, some of them self-made and some of them structural. It's expected do a lot.

Doesn't have a huge budget, but it really provides the, as you say, like the safe space for not for ministers to come together but also for experts from all countries are constantly on working groups and they're coming up with standards for various things for developing countries. So it's it really is an important institution. And I just would. It's there. And I was thinking about how Russia dropped out of the WTO early on or the Soviets dropped out early on because they said it was too US centric. And then the argument of the first Trump administration for wanting to drop out this last time was that it was too China centric. So, I mean, it's always got those problems. It has a lot it has 194 members. It's responsible to all of them. It's, you know, as sort of a constant diplomatic, you know, milieu that it's that it's dealing in. So. So I just I think it's an important organization that that should continue to be supported, particularly with. They have pandemic preparedness and response negotiations going on now that also are not going particularly well. But there's no other place where those kinds of issues could be taken up by the entire world. So it's, you know, just.

MCELWEE: Right. Right. And Carolin, based on your remarks on CODEX, fortunately we see it seems like we're seeing some collaborative collaboration continue to happen.

DEWAAL: Yeah, the US plays a really important role in CODEX. We actually run multiple committees, including the CODEX Committee on Food Hygiene, which is the oldest committee of CODEX. So the US has played an important role and it is part of WHO and FAO, but it actually is run by the countries. The countries run the committees and then they vote a central body, the CODEX commission. But again, the leadership there is all based on countries. So, again, it's a model that we need to be aware of as we as we enter this space. And I think just a really important message is bilateral relations are really important and in this instance are not going terribly well. But if you take them into a multilateral context, it can change the way people communicate and it is a very important mechanism.

So it's something that as you move forward in developing your project, thinking through both the bilateral and multilateral and one more point on this. We did have a lot of discussion at the convening about the potential benefits, for example, for food waste. If we have technologies to address food waste both in the US and China, they would not only be useful in those in the context of those

countries, but also for many developing countries and countries in the in Africa and Asia could also benefit. So finding the kind of solutions to address that would be good.

MCELWEE: Right, Right. There was always this tension in in our conversations about do we focus on bilateral challenges that would help the US or China, US and China, or do we focus on U.S. China coordination on challenges in third countries? And I don't think we landed on one. I think we need to continue to probe where there's more opportunity. But it was certainly a theme of our, of our conversations. And I mentioned on that note that we did do some conversations and workshops looking at international institutions aside on how track tools can be made more effective in this new environment. And one of the observations we heard on each side is that sometimes these tools are more productive when focused on multilateral issues as opposed to bilateral issues which are simply too contentious or when a third party is brought into the conversation. So I think triangulating and thinking about conversation, bilateral relations in a broader context might be a common, common thread here. I do want to open up to our audience. I'll call on the men first now, but I see we have a question back here. Yes, sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Yes. My name is Roger Crocetti and I'm an editorial contributor on technology policy for The Hill newspaper, recently posted an op ed entitled Is It Time for U.S., China, Apollo-Soyuz? And for those who don't know what Apollo-Soyuz means, at the peak of the Cold War, when where there was fighting in Vietnam and proxy wars with the Soviets in South America and Africa and everywhere, Nixon and Kissinger agreed to link up the U.S. and the Soviet space programs with Apollo-Soyuz docking. It was a spectacle for the world to watch. And in his later writing, Kissinger says they did it for educational reasons. They were trying to educate the American military. Soviet military. American politics. Soviet politics.

That there was something more than fighting with each other. The question I have then is, have any of you given any thought, obviously, there's a lot of dual use technology and a lot of what, you know, military technology. But there are intergalactic space probes. There are, you know, space telescopes to look at distant galaxies, things of that sort of any of you give it any thought to the prospect of a U.S.

Chinese spectacular outer space, you know, cooperation that might set the stage for attitudes in both countries, which is, again, what Nixon and Kissinger did with Apollo-Soyuz. It was a it was a stunt and show that there was a potential beyond war. Thank you.

MCELWEE: Thank you. And that's an excellent question. I wish one of us on the stage where we're a space expert here, but since we're not, I hope you'll don't you'll hope you won't mind if I if I tailor your question a little bit to think about an Apollo-Soyuz moment maybe in the food and agriculture space, what that would look like, or in the global health space, what that could look like. So maybe I'll turn to Caitlin to start. I'll put you on the spot and then Caroline and then we'll move to global Health.

WELSH: Yeah. Thank you. Thanks. Really, I appreciate your adaptation of that. Very good question. There could be if it were regarding a technology that that could be beneficial to agriculture in both countries. But that wouldn't be there wouldn't be suspicion around things like forced technology transfer or something like that. I'm thinking of a of an area like food loss and waste, which is something that we that we discussed in our convening where. I mean, there's there are enormous problems in both countries. China's the top has the most food loss in the of any country in the world. And it's also emits the most greenhouse gases. Food loss and waste has a strong link to greenhouse gas emissions.

Both countries have in place national level plans to reduce greenhouse gases. I'm sorry, to reduce food loss and waste. If there were. A technology and I don't know what that technology could be, but a technology that could be beneficial to both countries in addressing these problems, then I really don't see why there wouldn't be willingness to share that. I'll have to give some thought about something that could be like a bit more impactful because I struggle to see, you know, American citizens glued to their TVs to see something with regard to this. But there's potential and it's an important question. Great.

DEWAAL: So another idea kind of along the same line is the idea of alternative proteins. So alternative proteins are available. They've been used for decades in different continents, but they're not generally accepted for human consumption.

But a question that we were discussing is could they be used for animals, for animal feed taking protein sources that are not commonly used in human food, but applying them in animal feed? Because again, this you know, I really one of the big take home messages is food security equals feed security because you've got to feed the protein producing animals, whether they be chickens laying eggs or the beef and cattle and pigs, the beef and pigs that are providing human food. So we've just we've got to like think through like what would be big enough, what would be exciting enough? They could also solve some of our environmental problems. I mean, a lot of alternative food source is actually coming from the seas. It's fish byproduct that is being overfished, basically. So again, finding the right technology that would address a real problem and that we could demonstrate, you know, if it had some pizzazz, some.

MCELWEE: Right, right, right. On the topic of pizzazz, Nellie, I learned from a case study that smallpox was certified as eradicated in 1979. It was the only successful instance of human disease eradication in history. Wow. Well, so when we're thinking about pizzazz in the global health space today, what's something that the US and China could work together on accomplish that you think would have the same amount of global impact?

BRISTOL: Yeah, I know. I'm thinking I mean, it would be it could be polio eradication, but that is currently going in the wrong direction. So I mean, it's just it's hard to come up. I was thinking maybe vaccinations, but those also have become political in a way I'm not sure any of us could have predicted. So And everybody wants to create their own vaccine and only trust their own vaccine. I mean, that was such an amazing accomplishment. The COVID vaccine in the U.S. and the speed that we were able to come up with that. But I'm not really seeing it. I don't know what it would be maybe if there were a vaccine that, you know, maybe an Aids vaccine or some way that China and the US could work together on a medical breakthrough of some sort. But it's a tricky, tricky environment.

MCELWEE: Yes. Well, that's why we're doing this project. So, yeah, I'm going to I'm going to take Professor Lieberthal and then we'll go to user discussion.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: I had the pleasure as part of the Brookings Group. I'm sorry, terrific discussion. I had the pleasure as part of the Brookings Group of participating in the Blasio multi-day meeting. I think most of us wish we could have stayed there for several weeks. Great venue. What that discussion highlighted to me was that when the experts get together to discuss a major issue from the two sides, they find themselves generally on the same side of the table addressing the issue. And it's a terrific discussion. When you bring in the political side of it, each side is explaining kind of their sense of what the problems are politically and how difficult a lot of this would be to do. And, you know, so what kind of hurdles do you have to clear from that track to and from your broader engagement with these issues?

We did not have politicians with us. We had people who understood the decision making in both countries and some of the political constraints. My own sense is we have to figure out going forward a way to bring in at least some of the people who are active actively in our office, in the political systems, at the at the appropriate places in those systems, along with the experts. So the because we're educating the politicians on the problem and where we can really get something done that is not going to trip a major national security, you know, warning. But at the same time, we're educating the experts on the boundaries on which the other ways they have to think about it in order to really make major progress. Wondering whether any of you have any thoughts about how we can do that. Building it into these discussions more regularly, because that to me is the missing link, and it's an absolutely critical link to get really serious things done. Thank you.

MCELWEE: I have initial thoughts and then maybe I can turn to Caitlin. So I think that's an excellent point. And as you know, we brought in policy experts, including yourself, to start off with some roadblocks. But then we did have to put those aside and let the experts think about areas of collaboration. In subsequent conversations, I want to be sober about the pushback we've had to this idea of collaboration. And there are a whole host of challenges on each side, as you know, whether security, national security related challenges. As you mentioned, the whole idea of technology transfer is one that raises a lot of questions. In the United States. There are trust issues on each side. I think it's really important to bring in all of those counterarguments to these conversations.

So one thing we're planning to do as we go forward in this project is have dedicated conversations about all those roadblocks, really get them out on the table very early on to think about, you know, what would be the pushback to all of these proposals that we might come up with among the experts? What would be the pushback in Washington and Beijing to both? So I think we need to have dedicated experts with what you might call a more skeptical audience, and that includes sitting policymakers in both countries. And then and then slowly try to incorporate, you know, those individuals. If not those individuals, then at least bring those arguments to the table. When we're discussing concrete areas of potential collaboration in climate smart agriculture.

BRISTOL: Okay. Thank you. Great answer, Lily, and thank you so much. And it's wonderful to see you again. That's a very important question that you asked at this phase and in our project as we had wrap up really excellent conversations earlier this year and look forward to what will be what we'll be doing, the future. I think that the what that we do is building on what Lilly said. It's bringing in those skeptics. Well, I think it's two sides. It's bringing in those who are very open, policymakers who are very open to collaboration and informing them about the potential risks of this. And it's bringing in the skeptics that are afraid of any form of collaboration and talking about the potential benefits. So I think it's bringing them in and having an open conversation.

With each other and also with experts. And how do we do it? We do it through things like this. We do it at your institution, at our home institution, Brookings and CSIs, through closed door conversations and also through public conversations so that we can disseminate the lessons that we're learning like we're doing today. So I think it's yeah, it's important to bring that political angle in. And I think that there are there are both sides we need to address. Again, it's those who are really open to this collaboration. We need to be realistic about risks and those who are very reluctant. And we need to have an important conversation about benefits.

MCELWEE: All right. We have time for one more quick question, so I'll go to you, sir.

AUDIENCE MEMBER: Thank you. Lawrence Friedman I've been involved in Africa development policy for over 30 years and recently US-China relations. And I have a proposal to try to outflank the

current relations of the US as China as a competitor. I was at a conference in Beijing Defense conference I spoke at. And they think the U.S. is really not telling the truth, that they really see China as an enemy. So there you have the conflict of the zero-sum game mentality, where I propose that the conference is to outflank the situation by establishing a joint mission that's in the interest of both countries and the rest of the world, which is that Africa has 450 million people living in poverty and is the only nation in the world where poverty is increasing per person every year. China eliminated poverty, which everyone recognizes US has the largest economy in the world. Why not make a gift to Africa and a gift to mankind and say on this mission, the United States and China will jointly work to eliminate poverty and hunger in Africa by making the investment in infrastructure? And this is something that would be a noble expression of both nations and outflank the current mentality of what we call the rules-based order. It's ambitious, but it's the way I see of how getting outside the box of the current situation.

MCELWEE: Thank you so much. I think we're ending on the right note of ambitious. We've got a lot of work to do. I'll turn to Yes.

DEWAAL: I just I love that concept. It's very ambitious. But I also want to bring us back to the idea of trend triangulation. The African Union is getting very well-organized and bringing in like a third party sometimes can be very constructive. Yeah, just food for thought.

MCELWEE: Absolutely. That's one of our takeaways so far. So in this next phase of the project, over the coming years, we're going to put some of our emerging findings to the test, delving more into the area of climate smart agriculture. So while we're hopeful, we're ambitious, and we hope that you'll continue to follow our findings and join us at the next event. So thank you to the panel. Thank you.