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Inflection Point: India and the Changing World Order

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Amna Nawaz

Hi everyone. Thank you so much for joining us today. I'm absolutely honored to be in the company of our panelists today we have a lot to talk about. My plan is to moderate about 30 minutes or so and then open the floor to questions. So please keep in mind if I miss something or you'd like me to follow up on something, I would like to save time for your questions at the end as well but as I mentioned, quite a lot to cover. So I'm going to jump right in and because I'm a journalist, I'd like to start when the news. Secretary around let's begin with you, only because we've had some news in the last few days when it comes to politics in India and I'd like to get your analysis of the situation. The leaders of 26 opposition parties have now come together to form an alliance to try and lead an effort to oust Prime Minister Modi and next year's general elections really succeed, do they have a chance?

Nirupama Rao

Well, I certainly think that for a democracy to advance and to progress, you need to help the opposition and the efforts that are ongoing to consolidate this opposition for us, keeping in mind that we go into a general election next year is important. It's noteworthy, whether they will succeed you're asking me to be a fortune teller. I know India is not short of fortune tellers. But as far as I can see, I see it as a very healthy development. I see it as a development that I as an Indian would like to see go forward. But we have to keep in mind that the outcome of elections democratic elections in any country is very difficult to predict. The BJP, which is the majority party today, which has the government in Delhi has been in power now through two consecutive terms. It's nine years and it'll be 10 years next year. And Prime Minister Modi who leads the government enjoys wide popularity in India and that's a fact you can't deny whether you agree with his policies or not. That's another question and you can debate on that. But the fact is that the debate in India today, in many quarters really focuses on the record of the Modi government in the last nine, nine years and what they achieved and they have been, I believe this government particularly more than any other government before it has been very successful in essentially massaging the media, as it were, in the kind of message that is sent out

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to the Indian public and they have been very adept and very Deft and I joined about conveying to the population that this is really, as they call it, a number to call for India. A time of prosperity a time of progress. And that message seems to have a lot of credibility if one can put it in inverted commas as far as the population is concerned across this country and understand that this is a country of enormous diversity continental proportions. And the fact that Prime Minister Modi has done this in the last nine years is something that I hadn't seen before. So if you come back to what will happen in the elections next year, what the strength and power and the effectiveness of this opposition force will be what countries say they are combating a very very strong other side.

Amna Nawaz

And you've made a very nice segue for me to bring in Rana when it comes to that message being delivered both internally and externally. Rana How do you look at that in terms of the way Modi has managed to control the message and the way people see India from outside the country?

Rana Ayyub

Well, as a journalist, of course, the way I see India and the way I have seen India over the last couple of years now ever since Mr. Modi was in the United States, the United States got, you know, a view of the Democratic backsliding that we have been talking about in India over the last nine years. I mean, we talking about Mr. Trump was talking about the popularity of Mr. Modi, well the elections next year are skewed heavily in favor of Mr. Modi because of multiple reasons. One, this complete state capture of the media in India we don't have a robust Indian media are some of our best journalists, civil rights activists, student leaders are behind bars. There are attacks on civil liberties, attacks on democratic institutions. Talking about journalism as a journalist in the World Press Freedom Index, India ranks 1/61 position out of 180 and you're talking about the world's greatest democracy first largest democracy. Free to house has downgraded India from being free to party free. The attack on minorities Mr. Shiv Shankar Menon made a very important point when he was talking about the CA The citizenship Amendment Act in India where the Kenyan government wanted to give citizenship to all persecuted minorities except Muslims and they were nationwide protest about it and he said that we are we are, we can isolate ourselves internationally. So that's the truth about India. We'll be investigating agencies central agencies in India are heavily in favor of Mr. Modi. Most of the opposition leaders, including Ludwig Von D has recently been barred from parliament over a defamation case in which he has been charged for two years and he doesn't want he cannot even sit in Parliament. So that's the state of affairs of democracy in India. I mean, it's a democracy on paper. We will discuss more on that I purchased to weigh in on the elections next year.

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Amna Nawaz

Ambassador Menon I'd love for you to respond to what Ron just said also what Secretary rouse said. And also to put it into the context. I know you've talked about sort of the world being between global orders right now. So given what we've just heard, where does that place India right now?

Shivshankar Menon

Well, two parts for that just to take off from where she left it. I said that we run the risk of isolating ourselves internationally. If we go against the norms and start discriminating between those who we give citizenship to and we don't you also we don't. But the fact is that most states operate on their interest, not on their ideas, and then in most cases, that interest Trump values. So it's not as though the outside world is going to solve these problems for India. Secondly, when the outside world does China in to me, the reaction in India, like in most countries is very negative, that it actually strengthens those who are saying, look, the outside world is interfering. Anybody who speaks for the minorities, for democracy and so on is a foreign agent. You know, it leads to a form of chauvinism, a sort of ultra nationalism. So there is a risk here in in this equation, I think in the way we look at it, which we need to be very conscious of, but about the other one and when I say the word is between orders, it's because frankly, I wish the last time I can think of a concerted international response to a threat was the 2009 A through G 20. Summit in London, after the global financial crisis when we presented another Great Depression. But since then, look at the record there is no international order work with pandemic pathetic look at climate change for the better developing countries that nothing and you look at Ukraine. Is there an international order work here? If anything, it's an example of the breakdown of the vote. So for me, we are in transition. We're in a situation where there's a fundamental disjuncture in our economic power is even is distributed across the world, and the world is multipolar, economically, the US, the EU, China, but military power there's only one military superpower on earth only the US can project military power where she wants when she wants across the globe. the rest are all regional military powers, they might challenge the US in the region's China and the seas to China. But there is no so the world's unipolar militarily and politically were thoroughly confused. Have you seen what's happening to democracy around the world? We've seen what so how can we speak of an international order? That's not a bad thing from India's point of view.

Amna Nawaz

But what what does that mean from India's point of view?

Shivshankar Menon

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it opens up space for a lot of people who otherwise in a very fixed rigid, bipolar order, say during horrible, didn't have much space to work. So you see, suddenly, the people talk about the rise of middle powers. They took a swing state. Why is Aukus important? Australia starts playing a role and you see this across the world you see Turkey suddenly doing things which you didn't use to do before. And this so you for me the mantra now is issue based coalition's of the willing to depending on the issue, you'll find a few sets of partners to work with and it's not a bad situation.

Amna Nawaz

Joe despite those discriminatory policies we've seen put into place under the Modi government despite documented declines in democratic practices, their Prime Minister Modi received an incredibly warm welcome here in the US a number of major investments also announced to coincide with that visit. Why is that? How do you view the US India relationship right now?

Joseph Nye

Well, I think the as the one non Indian on the panel. I think it's quite extraordinary is how well Modi has played the diaspora. Indian diaspora in the United States is a huge benefit to US. And it's, you know, just look at the positions that they hold. We'd be much worse off as a country if we didn't have both the extraordinary support the Gasper for voting despite the things that Modi talked about. It's really quite impressive. And Modi has been very clever and playing that back into politics and deadily showing how important he is and how popular he is. And it gets to the larger point which you asked about is the US Indian relationship. For 20 years I've co chaired this Aspen Strategy Group, Indian CIA Federation, nicknamed the street group. And the one thing I've learned for that is that when we talk about each other as the world's two largest democracies, we just continue with each other. It doesn't tell us anything about the relationship in detail. On the other hand, if we take that objective point of view, and you notice that India, the United States have one common interest above all others, and it's named as China, and that means that you're going to find an alignment of alliances but not alignment in India, US relations, because of the concern about rising power of China. That then brings us back finally, to the point two Rana raised which is how then should we play the erosion of democracy in India? And I think Schumpeter's right that quietly is the more we get on a soapbox and tell India what they're doing wrong on democracy, the more it builds resistance, but there are lots of things that we can do behind the scenes in communications with the Modi government, and can also do societally through nongovernmental organizations to press the democracy. But overall, the key is going to be this alignment, which rests in China

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secretario did well that international pressure quietly or publicly will have an impact. You've talked before about how many Indians view that criticism as hypocritical so given the many discriminatory policies and things that Rana has worked has documented, many abuses in minority communities, that denial of basic rights, should the international community Wait, how should the international community weigh in on democratic issues in India?

Nirupama Rao

Well, I think the international community has every right to weigh in on the state of democracy in India and the policies of the Modi government, some of which obviously, are cause for concern. But there is also need, I think for all of us in this room, to understand, you know, the nature of the Indian state, the constitutional foundations of the Indian state, the history of India, the independence struggle, partition, post partition and all the challenges that were involved in governing a country of such proportions, managing diversity and ensuring socio economic transformation. In fact, our first prime minister never would talk about clothing the need naked masses, which should be the priority of the government. So understand that even as constitutional fine in some ways by the United States, the the precepts and the context and the environment from which that constitutional strength was really Indian, not foreign. So today, when Mr. Modi speaks of India being the mother of democracy, I mean, that may be a hugely, you know, a loose definition. I don't I don't want to go into what he meant by that. But the fact is, there has always been a centralizing urge within the Indian state and the constitutional provisions are that have been in a way utilized by every Indian government and talking of successive Indian governments to consolidate central rule. For instance, the use of article 356 of the Constitution to dismiss state governments quite arbitrarily if the central government wanted. So understand that the strong centralizing focus within Indian the Indian democratic state makes it very different from how you would define democracies in the West, particularly. So this is not a western style democracy. I'm not saying i i also subscribe to the ideals of freedom and what it means for all of us. But what does freedom mean for the man and woman on the Indian Street? It's a question of a better economic life. It's a question of sending their children to school. It's a question of better health facilities. So we're at a very young country. We are evolving. There are elites like us who are exposed to the world around us and know you know what democracy in the West means and subscribe very much to those ideas. But I'm talking of a vastly, you know, a big agglomerate of people beyond me, and what do they think? I think that's the question we need to ask.

Amna Nawaz

Rana you look deep in thought, as Secretary Rao is speaking there. Do you want to weigh in on this question of what democracy means to Indians?

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Rana Ayyub

I mean, over the last couple of years, every time I hear any conversation about India's its visa vie, China or Russia, we need India as a bulwark against China or Russia. How about talking about the Indian democracy itself? It is so important because India is a strategic country. India is one of the most important countries in the world. I mean, I every time I speak at an international platform, I have to first put this caveat that hey, I'm a patriotic Indian. I'm not here to defame India, because also by virtue of being a Muslim Indian, right, which is my which is why my patriotism is always a question. But I think it is extremely important for us to talk about the democratic backsliding because President Biden when he speaks about this for relationships with various countries keeps bringing up democratic rights and human rights and freedoms. In his in his joint statement with India, he spoke about how it's important for countries to come together. And when is the democratic vice versa? Is there a practicing democracy at play in India? I'm not questioning India. I think India is a great country. India's called Beyond moody or any other leader for that matter. I'm a proud Indian citizen. Embarrassing that I have to say it as often that I do. But I live in a country where where the 220 million Muslims of the country are being routinely humiliated. Genocide Watch has said that India is in the cusp of shadow side of its minorities. Just yesterday. For those who haven't seen the story. There's a report coming in from the northeastern state of Manipur, that there has been ongoing violence in the northeastern state of Manipur, there is civil unrest while Prime Minister Modi has been touring various countries as this wishful guru who has solutions for global peace and global problems while in the northeastern state for the last three months there has been ongoing violence in which more than 100 people have been killed in between in a war between indigenous tribes. Mr. Modi has not said a single word and the consequences as yesterday saw a video of two young woman paraded, stripped naked on the streets of Manipur, gan read the videos out on the internet and that pose the Prime Minister of India to put out a statement, a very half hearted statement this morning, an incident that happened three months ago. Here is a prime minister who speaks about women's rights equality, who also says when he was in the United States, I think Mr. Prime Minister Modi used the word democracy at least 100 or times, I think, I mean, I didn't count but I could just get a rough assessment. He has not taken a single press conference in nine years. But when he was forced to take a question by the press by a journalist from the Wall Street Journal, the journalist was hounded for the next couple of days because of a Pakistani Muslim origin. So much so that the US State Department had to put a statement that this is not in the Democratic interest of India for that matter, any other part of the world, talking about Muslims? I'll give you a very small example Mr. Moody talks about the United India and India which is important for the rest of the world. On the 75th year of Indian independence, he spoke about how women in India need to be liberated need to be safe. On the same day, he released because the company released the latest of Bill keys Bernal, the face of the construction site Muslims of 2002. What was that messaging about?

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When was the last time we heard about houses being marked with a cross by the aggressors of the victims? Do you know that analogy young house has been marked with a cross that's happening in India, Muslim houses being marked with a cross so that they can be demolished and Muslims can be attacked? When Mr. Modi was in the US, I'll just take a little more time when Mr. Modi was in the US President Obama made a statement about about about India for potentially witnessing a civil unrest if majority in sentiments are allowed to fester to that reaction, I'm going interpretive completely avoided to that. One of India's key ministers is to move these prominent chief minister say that we do not need a crusade Obama to talk about it. We have many load Hussein farmers to deal with in India before we go to Washington and the same Minister two days ago said that Muslims are responsible for price rice and vegetable and expensive vegetables in India every day India. I'm not saying the US needs to intervene. No, no country in the world has any business interfering in India that is our problem to fix. But when we spoke speak about democratizing ideas and shared and shared commitment. I think the US is very well aware where all what's happening to democracy in India, because for the last three years, it has released its Religious Freedom Report in which it has been skating on India.

Rana Ayyub

Rana, I think we could easily talk about this the entire hour if we wanted to I do and thank you for that. I do want to bring it back to the larger picture here. Which something Joe mentioned about the US India Alliance and Ambassador you and I were speaking about this earlier and the role of China in all of this. There was a headline recently that asked a very important question. I don't know that we asked a lot which is what if China and India became friends what if they resolved this long standing border dispute? Could that be not only transformational for the region for the two nations, but also for the entire planet? What do you make?

Shivshankar Menon

Well, it's the piece you're talking about is the one in the economist. Yes. It makes sense. Obviously, as if you do it as a mental exercise. I mean, what happens if India and China come to some kind of understanding at least if not a settlement of the of the boundary problem, which is a basic problem. But I think the core issue between India and China is more than just the boundary we have had extended periods 30 years before, after from the 80s onward with when we manage the boundary quite peacefully, and nobody died on our border from 1975 until 2020. So that's, it's not that we can't and so why are we in trouble now? Because I think today, we rub up against each other and you know, there's a periphery India's periphery is China's periphery. China seems to see India as an obstacle to her rights. And for the last five years or so you will hear Chinese scholars say that India is no longer normal and is no longer neutral and and I've heard someone say India has gone over to the dark side. Basically what we're doing with the US because we have transformed the relationship with us having today

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here in the US to almost everything that allies do short of that commitment to mutual defense, which is what an alliance is. So as it's not an alliance it's as it's a partnership, but I think the reason we got to where we are is not China. The US looks at India, through a Chinese lens, because China is the big rival of India looks at the US as an essential partner as we are to transform India. Our job is to change India. So make India into a more prosperous, secure country, wherever you can achieve their full potential. And for that for us is essential. China's not gonna to help us do it. It's not going to happen. So in a strange way, in India today, I mean, this whole aspirational middle class, this very, very pro us they sell real estate outside New Delhi by calling it Palm Springs and Nassau County. Yeah, it's they don't make it look like nasau. But the name works and they can up the price. So in India, actually, India looks at the relationship with the US in a in a slightly broader way. The US looks at it primarily geopolitical right now that's there is tremendous geopolitical conduct on a whole host of issues, especially maritime security over indivisibility and so on. So that's fine. But I think we need to there is a nuance there, which I think we need to be aware of. Can India and China get together? Can they separate I don't see why not. We have 4000 years of statecraft between us and we should be able to do something.

Joseph Nye

Shankar makes a good point that it's not just China, but a lot of it is China and we're kidding ourselves if we don't see it that way. I'll give you an anecdote, long before the recent crisis, all the way back to the 1960s border crises. We have other businesses with India, which include the issues of democracy but also nuclear proliferation. I was sent during the Carter administration. To call on Indian Prime Minister Rajiv is saying and I said, you know, there's a grave danger that you and Pakistan getting into an arms race and a nuclear dimension will make you both worse off, and the answer was, don't talk to us about Pakistan. We're interested in China. This was 1977 Long before the current situation. The other thing I would I would note is when we started these dialogues, which was right after 911 So our first dialogue was in 2002, too. And what struck me was when you talk to our Indian counterparts across the table with the little base building, covering green, and a little flag on each side, we were told how much India and China have in common how much they wanted to keep this relationship working or not. Then when you had drinks afterwards, and after the second drink, you would get the fact that we're scared as hell out of China and we're counting on you to help us do something about it

Amna Nawaz

always after the second drink.

Joseph Nye

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But the point is interesting. I agree with Shaka there's much more to the relationship than just China. And in fact, where you started the diaspora is another important part of the India us relationship. So it is a it's a multifaceted relationship of many different parts. But to go back to Rana's important points, if we forget the fact that China is going to be the key in terms of why these two countries are going to align, not ally. Align. We're not going to be able to understand the relationship.

Amna Nawaz

Secretary Rao given yes, we're in this time of shifting global orders world orders. But there is a clear division right now in terms of the war in Ukraine. Right there is US and the NATO alliance and there is Russia and her allies, and India has largely maintained a neutral position. Is that tenable in the long run?

Nirupama Rao

Well, before I answer your question, I just wanted to speak to what Rana Honda said please about democratic backsliding. And I think we have to understand that no country has all the angels on their side. And I leave it that and we all have clay in our soils. I think so it's not, you know, everybody, democracy such as ours are endeavoring to create that perfect union as you know, I've said here in America many times, so that I thought I flagged But secondly, about China, will we be friends, given the history of the relationship and the fact that we tried to be friends in the 50s and did not succeed and a wall between us I think that the trauma and the impact the the what shall I say the injuries from that wall continue to be embedded very strongly in the Indian psyche? And that hasn't gone away despite three decades of efforts by both governments to try and manage the redeem of relations between the two countries. Shankar referred to the fact that we didn't have a single death on the border for close to 45 years from 1975 onwards, but all that has changed. So I recall what Michael Ignatius says about the distinction between enemies and adversaries. And I think China will always be our adversary it may not be that an enemy in the sense Pakistan and India are, but it will be an adversity coming to Ukraine. Yes, everybody has, you know, there are eyebrows raised in this country and in the West about the position that India has taken on the Ukraine war. And Will is the stainable was your question. Well, if you ask an Indian policymakers sitting in South block in New Delhi, he or she is going to say that this is terrible and this and you know, this is a proven physician in many ways, because India has maintained its communications with Russia because it feels that the relationship with Russia is important strategically to us, because it's a it's a legacy partnership in some ways. It predates the Cold War, but it has continued to yield for India, in the sense that we have a strong defense relationship with India with Russia. We haven't really been able to establish that degree of self reliance in our defense industry that will enable us to cut all that tells us to Russia, which is something that I personally think should have

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been done long ago, but it hasn't happened and we are Army, Navy and Air Force and strong dependencies on the Russian supply line, as it were. Now the argument within the country among Russia specialists in India, is that you know what the West has to say about Russia, and its performance in the war may not exactly complete the picture, because as far as Russian equipment is concerned, some of it the battle equipment that we also get from them has been tried and tested in the Ukraine war, and therefore it's much more battle ready than it was before. That's an that's a belief and you can debate it. I'm not saying whether it's right or wrong. But when it comes to Ukraine, we have we have certainly not We don't support the erosion or the invasion or the Adi aggression, really on Ukraine and the violation of its territorial integrity and sovereignty by Russia. that's that's something that is not something we support. But the fact is that every country in the conduct of its foreign policy has to look at both values and until you look at your geography, in many ways India is omni directional, it faces north and south east and west. The position that we have the geography of us of India within the Eurasian landmass has to be taken note of and therefore, given an adversarial relationship with China, we need to keep contact and communication open with countries like Russia, Russia and China and Bell phone, the confederacy of sorts, and be that as it may, that doesn't cause give us comfort, no doubt, but the fact is we have certain equities in that relationship with Russia that are important to us. And we need therefore, to keep that communication open and our energy of course, our energy requirements for the country of 1.4 billion. You know, buying oil from Russia today has also been something that has been the object of criticism in this country, but but it is the fact that we need it and we've kept below the price gap by large and a lot of this oil, you know, gets processed in Indian goes to Europe today. So you know, the the, it's a very, very incorrect picture in many ways. If you look at the strategic situation, and Shanker talked about a world between orders it's really a turn of the century world although we are very much into the 21st century.

Amna Nawaz

I wasn't kidding when I said we have a lot to talk about. I have a lot more questions, but I'd love to open it up to the room. Why don't we start down here in the front? Probably have time for two or three questions. And if you wouldn't mind direct your question to a specific panelist.

Audience question

Hi, my name is Kim and I'm a rising leader. I have a question for a secretary. Well technology cooperation to US and India is rapidly expanding in regards to the economic prosperity of India. How do you see India doing in terms of its domestic electricity and water supply infrastructure and expanding the middle class to meet the demands for India to be one of the premier places for them? In the Global South? We're doing this particularly semiconductors. Thank you.

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Nirupama Rao

Thank you. Well, as far as critical and emerging technologies are concerned, as you know, it's now at the core of the Indo US relationship and if you read the joint statements, and joint statement that the the, you know, whatever was said, about the Modi's visit to the United States, you realize that this is really a one in next frontiers of the Indo US relationship that both countries seek to explore given the tensions with China also China always comes back it's the familiar compound goes back, what whatever you say, do I think today between India and the US, but we need those technologies and you raise the issue of infrastructure in India and Modi's India if you can call it that. The it's all about infrastructure, infrastructure, infrastructure. Everybody is an you know, you've seen the transformation not just within this government. I think it goes back to previous governments also, you know, in terms of the roads, the railway connectivity, we're even talking about bullet trains how far we do that, I don't know. But all this is really directed to it's a people centered thing, really, and that's where elections come in. That's where winning elections come in. That's where women come in, for instance, cooking gas connections for women in the rural areas. These are things that you know, people relate to and I think probably, you know, this is how, you know, the popularity of the prime minister gets augmented each time and then of course, the enormous deafness with which the message is portrayed. So, I don't know if I've answered your question, but that question, yes.

Audience question

Investor Patrick Wilson from media tech, just as a follow up to the excellent question that just came in. He has been very aggressive in courting Taiwanese technology companies. To come to India and invest in India. And I'm wondering how that relationship that can be that Modi government has been trying to establish with Taiwan is affecting the India China relationship.

Nirupama Rao

Well, as far as the Chinese are concerned, they they are innately suspicious about anything we do in the Indo Pacific. They're suspicious about our relationship with the United States. They're obviously suspicious about any outreach that we make to Taiwan. India has been quite careful, I believe in, you know, in seeing what the political ramifications of building a closer relationship with Taiwan would be. It's not that we keep repeating like a mantra that we believe in the One China policy we haven't done that for a decade. But I think India is trodden quite carefully. And in fact, if you look at India statements on the dispute with China and what has happened on the border or the line of actual control with China, I think Indian spokespersons have been enormously careful. I think they've weighed every word carefully, and that I think, in a way, it's also suggestive of the fact that we don't want the situation to deteriorate to a level where there's really kinetic conflict between India and China. And I think that would be enormously problematic. And let's say to put it mildly, for us and for and for China, and of course, it's an

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enormous asymmetry of power between India, China today and talking of material power in terms of GDP difference and in terms of the military capability of China basically as but But to answer your question with Taiwan, there is a lot of economic outreach happening. you know, in the semiconductor industry, particularly, there's a lot of conversation going on with Taiwan and a lot of impact being felt on the ground that Taiwanese companies are coming in to invest in the Indian economy.

Amna Nawaz

I'm afraid we will have to leave it there. Ladies and gentlemen, please join me in thanking