

Speaker 1 ([00:00](#)):

Thank you very much. You're all most welcome.

Nicholas Burns ([00:29](#)):

Good morning, everyone. Good morning. I'm Nick Burns, executive director of the Aspen Security Forum. Welcome to all of you. This is kind of a revolutionary event for us. It's our first in-person meeting in over two years of the Aspen Security Forum, so welcome, everybody. I'm very pleased to have everybody here. I want to welcome especially the ambassador of Ireland, Ambassador Dan Mulhall, who is here today. Pleasure to see him. Follow him on Twitter and learn a lot about Ireland and Irish poetry as well.

Nicholas Burns ([01:07](#)):

Just a few words from me before we begin and before we welcome General Mark Milley, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, with Lester Holt. I want to thank everybody for being here because we're meeting at a really consequential time for the United States. And if you just look at the trip that President Biden took, and he came back after midnight last night, and saw what he had to do with other world leaders at the G20 summit in Rome, at the COP26 climate summit in Glasgow in Scotland. We're dealing with the specter of climate change, and the need for the entire world, seven billion people, 195 nation states, to come together not just this year, but every year for the next 10 to 15 years to arrest the movement of climate change.

Nicholas Burns ([01:51](#)):

We're obviously having difficulty globally in returning to global economic growth because of the ravages of the coronavirus on the global economy, particularly in the developing world. We've seen that and the president had to deal with that. The fact that five million people have now died from COVID-19 over the last year and a half, that number is probably higher if you really think about the impact of COVID in the world today. The fact that many of us had been fully vaccinated, but billions of people living in lower income countries have not had access to vaccines. And so, that issue obviously animated the discussions in Rome and in Glasgow.

Nicholas Burns ([02:34](#)):

The full range of cyber threats to our economy, to our national security establishment, cyber criminals and cyber terrorists. We'll hear more about that. And obviously from an American perspective, the rise in power and self-confidence of China, the People's Republic of China, of the Russian Federation, of other antidemocratic forces around the world, and President Biden obviously has made it a signature issue for his administration to unite the democratic world and unite our allies and partners in common cause.

Nicholas Burns ([03:09](#)):

For those of us in national security, the irony is that for the United States to face these problems, we have to begin at home. We have to begin by rebuilding our economy, our infrastructure, rebuilding a sense of purpose and unity with both political parties in Washington, and it really does begin here at home, and we hope that's the purpose of the Aspen Security Forum to bring you all here to hear from a variety of speakers from our national security establishment and beyond about these problems.

Nicholas Burns ([03:45](#)):

And we certainly need bipartisanship. The hallmark of our group, the Aspen Strategy Group, for 37 years now has been we're not bipartisan, we're nonpartisan. And when we enter these doors as Republicans or Democrats or independents, we think about our country first and the need for our country to come together. And frankly, I'm a little bit optimistic here. We all know, and you watched television last night and saw the results from Virginia and New Jersey and elsewhere, we know we're badly divided here at home, and we've got to fix that.

Nicholas Burns ([04:18](#)):

But I do think, and I know our co-chairs Condoleezza Rice and Joe Nye, our director Anja Manuel and I all agree that there is common cause on national security issues between our two parties, and I think you'll hear about that, but that's the mission of this group. It's kind of a radical idea that you bring Republicans and Democrats together, but that's what we've been doing for three decades and we'll continue to do that as well.

Nicholas Burns ([04:43](#)):

Today's program is charged. We're going to begin with the leader of our armed forces in the US military, General Mark Milley, Chairman Milley of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. I just want to say he's a Boston guy. He and I are both from Boston so that means Red Sox, Bruins, Celtics, Patriots nation. So thank you, Chairman Milley. We'll hear from General Paul Nakasone, who directs our Cyber Command and of course is Director of the National Security Agency.

Nicholas Burns ([05:12](#)):

We're going to have a big discussion about global vaccines with Gayle Smith from the State Department. We'll hear from our co-chair and my longtime friend and my former boss, former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice at noon today about the health of our democracy at home and what we need to do overseas. Representative Adam Schiff will be here, Senator Jack Reed. It's a full day. I want to thank you for being with us. And I want to introduce my friend and director, Anja Manuel. Thanks, everyone.

Anja Manuel ([05:51](#)):

Thank you all. Good morning. Thank you for coming here. It's such a pleasure to see people in real life, so thank you for being with us today. I just want to have a moment to think about a great man we lost recently, and that's General Powell. He was one of the giants in our profession. We've lost a lot of that generation recently, George Shultz in the spring, General Scowcroft, who is our founder of the Aspen Strategy Group, last year, last summer.

Anja Manuel ([06:21](#)):

These folks were giants in their profession. But what they always said, they put country above party, and they said... I heard General Scowcroft say at several times, the responsibility is on all of us. This isn't a few giants who are out there in the field. The responsibility is on all of us in this room, people who are members of the military who are out there on the front lines keeping us safe every day, members of the administration, people in our legislature, and all of us here in this room who are journalists, scholars to keep this country safe and peaceful.

Anja Manuel ([06:57](#)):

So that's one of the things that we are trying to do here at the Aspen Security Forum, to teach in a nonpartisan and bipartisan way what's going on in foreign policy to help all of us understand better the big issues that face our country and jointly help resolve them. And none of this would be possible without all of the sponsors who have made this great event, in-person event, absolutely possible, and I'll just name them.

Anja Manuel ([07:25](#)):

Mastercard has been very generous, McKinsey, Microsoft, The MITRE Corporation, Raytheon, Rockefeller Foundation, Rebellion AI, HDA, Intel, PhRMA, WhatsApp, American Airlines, and Capgemini. So let's give them a round of applause. And now without further ado, could I ask Chairman Mark Milley and Lester Holt to join me on the stage? They need very little introduction. Please, you can take your seats.

Anja Manuel ([08:02](#)):

General Milley is the 20th chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, of course the nation's highest ranking military officer and the principal military advisor to the president. Previously, he served as chief of staff of the US Army. He commanded many battalions, brigades, including the 101st Airborne Division, amongst others, and he of course served all over the world, including with ISAF in Afghanistan. Lester Holt is the anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News and an award-winning journalist. We cannot imagine anyone better to interview General Milley. Thank you to both of you.

Lester Holt ([08:39](#)):

I think we can remove these.

General Mark Milley ([08:39](#)):

Yeah.

Lester Holt ([08:44](#)):

I think we got special dispensation to remove these for this conversation. Have a seat, sir. And thank you for doing this. And on behalf of all my colleagues at NBC News, I want to thank the forum for the partnership, the relationship that we continue enjoying for the opportunities like this, and general, it's great to see you.

General Mark Milley ([09:02](#)):

Thanks, Lester.

Lester Holt ([09:03](#)):

[crosstalk 00:09:03] We got a lot to talk about.

General Mark Milley ([09:04](#)):

Absolutely.

Lester Holt ([09:04](#)):

I know that China is probably at the top of your list of strategic concerns. But before we get there, there's been a lot of reporting, some commercial satellite photographs recently showing Russian troop movements near Ukraine. I want to get your thoughts on that. What can you confirm and what do you see there?

General Mark Milley ([09:25](#)):

Well, a couple of things. There's a lot of media reporting out there from various states, Ukraine, the media in Ukraine, Poland, other states that border Russia, and then it's being picked up in Western media. What we're seeing, as what John Kirby mentioned yesterday, is a significant amount of military movement on the Russian side of the Ukrainian border. Nothing overtly aggressive per se. We've seen this before. Every year, they do an annual exercise called Zapad.

General Mark Milley ([09:56](#)):

Last April, the Russians ran a very, very large exercise somewhere in the tune of about 50,000 troops or so. So what does this mean? We don't know yet. Too early to tell, but we're continuing to monitor it with all of our capabilities and we'll stay abreast of it.

Lester Holt ([10:14](#)):

All right. Let's turn to China right now. There's long concerns about China's military buildup and that was certainly emphasized with this hypersonic test, believed to be a weapon that orbited the earth before carrying out a typical missile profile. You had made some comments about that, but I think a lot of us were alarmed by your alarm over it. What can you tell us?

General Mark Milley ([10:37](#)):

Yeah. So China's an interesting case for me, the military, the Pentagon. We look at the world through nation state threats, non-nation state threats, and a variety of other challenges to the United States. You see a big conference happening overseas with climate and so on. So there's a lot of challenges in the national security world to the United States. But for me, the number one challenge, which Secretary Austin and secretaries before him have called the pacing threat, is China.

General Mark Milley ([11:11](#)):

So what have we seen? We've seen a country in, what, four decades since the reforms of Deng Xiaoping in a very short amount of time, relatively speaking, go from the number seven economy in the world to the number two economy in the world. They've had, roughly speaking, a 10% rise over run economically for almost four decades. It's slowed down a little bit to 5 or 6%. And they've done what countries in the past have always done when they get that rich is they've invested in a very significant military.

General Mark Milley ([11:41](#)):

So 40 years ago, it was a very large infantry, peasant-based army, mostly army. Today, it has capabilities in space, in cyber, land, sea, air, undersea, and they are clearly challenging us regionally and their aspiration is to challenge the United States globally. They've been very clear about that in open articles and speeches and so on. They have a China dream. And they want to challenge the so-called liberal rules based order that went into effect in 1945 at the end of World War II. They want to revise it.

General Mark Milley ([12:18](#)):

So we have a case here of a country that is becoming extraordinarily powerful that wants to revise the international order to their advantage. That's going to be a real challenge over the coming years. In the next 10, 20 years, that's going to be really significant for the United States.

Lester Holt ([12:36](#)):

You've been watching that growth, but at the same time, the impression we're getting is that that weapons test, that hypersonic test, was a surprise. I think you used a term that it could be a Sputnik moment.

General Mark Milley ([12:46](#)):

I did.

Lester Holt ([12:47](#)):

It might be a Sputnik... Sputnik, remind us all, was a moment because we didn't have that capability at the time. Do we have the capability to match what we just saw from China?

General Mark Milley ([12:59](#)):

Well, I won't go into anything classified as to what our specific capabilities are, or what theirs are for that matter. But I will just say that that test that occurred was a very significant test. Is hypersonics new? No, they're not new. They've been around for a while. So in that limited, narrow sense, it's not a Sputnik moment, because Sputnik was new at the time. But I would argue that the nature of that particular test, taken as part of a whole, if you look at, again, 40 years ago, they had zero satellites, look at what they've got today. They had no ICBMs, look at what they've got today. They had no nuclear weapons, look what they got today. They have no fourth or fifth generation fighters or even more advanced fighters back then, look what they got today. They had no navy, look what they have today. They had no sub force, look what they have today.

General Mark Milley ([13:48](#)):

So if you look at the totality, this test that occurred a couple weeks ago, is only one of a much, much broader picture of a military capability with respect to the Chinese that is very, very significant. In my view, we're witnessing one of the largest shifts in global geo-strategic power that the world has witnessed, and it only happens once in a while. And it's not standalone. It's happening within what I would call a operating environment, a change in the character of war, so that happens once in a while.

General Mark Milley ([14:25](#)):

In terms of a fundamental change in the character of war, what we're seeing today is a fundamental change, and that only happens every... The last big one was between World War I and World War II with the introduction of the airplane and mechanization and the radio. Today, you're seeing robotics, artificial intelligence, precision munitions, and a wide variety of other technologies that, in combination, are leading to a fundamental change in the character of war. And if we, the United States military, don't do a fundamental change to ourselves in the coming 10 to 15 to 20 years, then we're going to be on the wrong side of a conflict with China.

Lester Holt ([14:59](#)):

If this weapon has the capabilities that have been widely reported, the ability to orbit and then strike, is it destabilizing?

General Mark Milley ([15:08](#)):

I think that there's a potential for that, sure, that there could be some strategic instability introduced into that, which is another whole factor. As we go forward in the operational environment, you look back at the Cold War, you mentioned Colin Powell, and Brent Scowcroft, and others. Those guys all grew up in the Cold War, where it was a bipolar world between the Soviet Union and the United States.

General Mark Milley ([15:27](#)):

We are entering into a tripolar world with the United States, Russia, and China being all great powers. Just by introducing three versus two, you already get increased complexity. Now, if you add into that all the other technologies that are coming at us very, very quickly, you're going... In my view, we're entering into a world that is potentially much more strategically unstable than, say, the last 40, 50, 60, 70 years. So what does that mean? That means that we're going to have to put a premium, in my view, on maintaining great power peace.

General Mark Milley ([16:04](#)):

The world order, the so-called liberal world order that was put in place in 1945, that was not designed to prevent Korea or Vietnam or Gulf War I, or terrorism for that matter. It was designed to prevent World War III. It was designed to prevent great power war. And it's been successful, for we're in the 76th year. The two times before, historically, you look at the Treaty of Westphalia that lasted about 100 years, you look at the Concert of Europe that lasted about 100 years.

General Mark Milley ([16:31](#)):

So we're in the 76th year of this great power peace. And we are entering into a period, in my personal opinion, of increased potential instability and risk. And we, Russia, China, and everybody else, all the allies and partners, are going to have to be very, very careful and conscious about how we deal with each other going forward.

Lester Holt ([16:57](#)):

In that same vein, we've also seen more Chinese air activity in the defense zone surrounding Taiwan.

General Mark Milley ([17:05](#)):

Yeah.

Lester Holt ([17:05](#)):

Is it your belief that China is preparing to make a move on Taiwan in the near future?

General Mark Milley ([17:12](#)):

It depends on what you mean by near future. So I've said in testimony that my personal estimate is, and I hesitate to speculate on anything in the future, because anything can happen. There's a wide variety of scenarios that could happen. But I would say that, based on my analysis of China, I don't think that it is likely in the next near future being defined as 6, 12, maybe 24 months, that kind of window. Having said that though, the Chinese are clearly and unambiguously building the capability to provide those options

to the national leadership, if they so choose at some point in the future. But near future, probably not. But anything can happen.

Lester Holt ([17:53](#)):

It recently became public that you had communications with your Chinese counterpart over signals that how they may be interpreted. Are you talking about this? Have they talked to you about their current capabilities and tests?

General Mark Milley ([18:13](#)):

I would say that I don't typically talk about the substance of the conversations I have with my Russian counterparts, my Chinese counterparts, except to other members of government with appropriate classifications, et cetera, typically. And the calls that you're talking about, I testified to a week or so or a couple weeks ago, but what that's indicative of, in my mind, is the need for increased, not decreased, increased mil-to-mil communications, government-to-government communications, because part of deterrence is having the capability to impose costs in your opponent, and making sure that you have the political will to actually use it, but also a third piece of deterrence, it's really important, is clear, unambiguous communications between both sides.

General Mark Milley ([18:57](#)):

As long as they're coordinated and as long as the various parts of the government are involved in that, it's very important. So I think those calls, and I've made many calls to counterparts around the world, it's part of my job. I think those calls are indicative of something that we're going to have to reinforce, expand, and need more of as we go forward in the next 10, 20 years. It's communication between great powers.

Lester Holt ([19:20](#)):

I want to mention Afghanistan in the context of the signals that it may have sent. Do you think that China, other adversaries have been emboldened by the perception that the US was not there for one of its allies? They were witness certainly to the withdrawal, the chaotic withdrawal.

General Mark Milley ([19:38](#)):

Sure.

Lester Holt ([19:38](#)):

What signal did that send?

General Mark Milley ([19:40](#)):

Well, they may or may not have interpreted it like that. If they did, that's a misinterpretation. We were in Afghanistan for 20 years, so 20 years is not exactly turning your back on an ally. We invested a massive amount of money, a lot of treasure, and most importantly the lives of many of our soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines. We gave a lot to Afghanistan.

General Mark Milley ([20:04](#)):

If Russia or China or any other adversary is interpreting the conclusion of our involvement in Afghanistan in terms of weakness or walking away or turning our back, I think that would be a misinterpretation on

their part. And as we go into the future, I think that the United States oftentimes gets underestimated and we oftentimes get misinterpreted. That's historically true. And I would caution any country out there to think that the United States is, in any manner, shape, or form, kind of weak or anything, that would be a bad call on their part.

Lester Holt ([20:38](#)):

What is the US commitment to Taiwan?

General Mark Milley ([20:42](#)):

Well, as you know, we have the Taiwan Relations Act and the Three Communiques that go with it. They came into being during the Nixon administration. Those are still the US government's policy and it's really an issue of ambiguity. But what we want with the US government's policy is that whatever issues Taiwan and the People's Republic of China have, they resolve them peacefully, in accordance with the will of the people of the island of Taiwan and the people of China. We're just interested in a peaceful outcome.

Lester Holt ([21:12](#)):

Our reporting has been the tabletop exercises, involving the US trying to defend Taiwan from a Chinese incursion have ended badly for the US.

General Mark Milley ([21:24](#)):

War games, you mean? Yeah.

Lester Holt ([21:25](#)):

War games. Do we have the capability to defend Taiwan?

General Mark Milley ([21:29](#)):

We absolutely have the capability to do all kinds of things around the world to include that if required. Those would be policy presidential decisions, whether or not we do that, and hence the policy of the Taiwan Relations Act. But we absolutely have the capability. There's no question about that.

Lester Holt ([21:46](#)):

All right. On Afghanistan, you've said that ISIS can reconstitute itself within six months in Afghanistan. What does that mean? Will they have the capability to strike the US homeland?

General Mark Milley ([21:56](#)):

Yeah. That's the key for us as we go forward here with respect to Afghanistan. Our mission, our task, not just the military, but the inter-agency and the whole-of-government approach, the CIA, et cetera, is to continue to monitor the indicators and warnings of a reconstituted ISIS or al-Qaeda. And if we see that, then to present the president with a variety of options. And if we need to, we'll strike in order to delay, disrupt, destroy, et cetera. So that's the same actual test that we had shortly after 9/11 is to prevent Afghanistan from becoming a platform for terrorists to strike the United States. And we are doing that and setting up the architecture to do that.

General Mark Milley ([22:39](#)):

ISIS, in my opinion, my view, my estimate, is that the Taliban are going to be challenged, they are being challenged, as to whether they can adequately govern the landmass called Afghanistan, or is Afghanistan going to devolve into warring factions and warlordism and further civil war, et cetera, which provides the environment for the reconstituted al-Qaeda and/or ISIS. And I think right now, it's an open question as to whether they can do that. My own personal estimate is that the conditions are likely to be set for a reconstituted ISIS or al-Qaeda, and I gave out windows of time, six months, and I gave it out to 36 months.

General Mark Milley ([23:24](#)):

But somewhere in that window, you are likely to see a reconstituted al-Qaeda. Does that mean they're going to attack the United States? And ISIS. Does that mean they will attack the United States? Maybe, maybe not. It depends. First, they have to reconstitute. Second, they have to develop their capability, then they would have to plan, coordinate, synchronize an operation and then execute. For terrorists, that takes considerable length of time. We'll see.

General Mark Milley ([23:48](#)):

In the meantime, what we're going to do is maintain our ability to monitor, and if necessary, take action. The other thing that that talks to is, we as a great power. We're going to have to deal with a rising China, a revisionist China if you will, we have to deal with Russia, as you mentioned in your opening question, we still have North Korea, we have Iran, we have terrorists, we have climate change, we have COVID, we've got wildfires, we've got all kind of challenges out there.

General Mark Milley ([24:19](#)):

And as a great power, we've got to be able to do all of those simultaneously. And the military is one piece of all the tools that we have as a country. But we, the military, play an important role in many of those. So we'll continue to deal with a reconstituted ISIS or al-Qaeda if that happens. At the same time, we'll deter China and Russia and assure our allies and partners and all the other tasks that we have.

Lester Holt ([24:42](#)):

You recently found yourself in the unusual position of having to deal with the Taliban to facilitate the exit of Americans and others from Afghanistan during the fall. Are you still in touch with the Taliban? Is there any working relationship going forward, whether it's dealing with ISIS or trying to get other Americans or green card holders out of Afghanistan?

General Mark Milley ([25:05](#)):

I am not, personally, but the US government is through the State Department.

Lester Holt ([25:09](#)):

Talking to the Taliban?

General Mark Milley ([25:11](#)):

Sure. We're talking to them day-to-day to try to continue to get American citizens out of Afghanistan, which is still happening. It's still ongoing. So American citizens and others that we have worked with in the past or the legal permanent residents or the SIV holders, et cetera. There's ongoing discussions

between the State Department, not the Department of Defense, not the military, but the State Department and the Taliban in order to help facilitate the exit of American citizens.

Lester Holt ([25:38](#)):

I know you and the administration have talked about over-the-horizon capabilities, should the need come, to strike within Afghanistan. And I know you don't like to speculate, but do you eliminate the possibility that American troops may have to reoccupy on some level in Afghanistan? For example, if there is a threat against the US homeland.

General Mark Milley ([26:00](#)):

I think, as we look at a terrorist threat going forward, whether it's Afghanistan or anywhere else, our general position, as we look at lessons learned over the last 20 years, is to make sure that we have the capability to monitor through intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance capabilities that we have, and then to conduct strike operations, whether they are strike operations from inside the country or outside the country. Those are different tactics that we can use.

General Mark Milley ([26:29](#)):

In addition to that, we want to continue to work with host nations and work by with them through partner nations to help facilitate that. Specifically with respect to Afghanistan, do I envision, in the future, some reintroduction of military forces on the ground in Afghanistan? Those would be presidential choices, policy choices, so I would never say, "Always never say never," sort of thing. But I think it's unlikely at this point.

Lester Holt ([26:57](#)):

I want to follow-up one of your answers a moment ago just to clarify. Is the military part of the American evacuation effort over in Afghanistan?

General Mark Milley ([27:07](#)):

Yes. The military component ended on the 31st of August.

Lester Holt ([27:12](#)):

So no more transports going and no more C-17s?

General Mark Milley ([27:15](#)):

That's correct.

Lester Holt ([27:16](#)):

All right.

General Mark Milley ([27:16](#)):

Not at this time.

Lester Holt ([27:17](#)):

So what kind of... I mean, in talking about China, you suggested that our orientation has to change as a military, so where are we in the war on terror? Is that book now closed? Did we move past it?

General Mark Milley ([27:28](#)):

No, absolutely not. Not in my opinion. The terrorism comes from a variety of reasons. It's a tactic. It's a means to inflict violence in order to achieve some political objective. And the terrorism that we've been dealing with for 20 years or more with al-Qaeda, with ISIS, with the Taliban, with al-Shabaab, with all these various groups around the world is based upon an ideology. It's a movement. And until or unless that movement ceases, until unless that ideology ceases, we're going to be dealing with terrorists and terrorism for a long time to come.

General Mark Milley ([28:04](#)):

How do you get rid of that movement? How do you get rid of that ideology? That's going to be much more dependent upon indigenous countries in the region than it is on the United States. That is going to be dependent on rule of law, good governance, enfranchisement of peoples around the world, so that the grievances that led to terrorism to begin with are somehow stripped away. You're probably never going to eliminate it completely, as in just complete elimination, but you need to be able to reduce it to a small, manageable level, and that is going to take a considerable amount of time, and we'll be dealing with it for a long time to come.

Lester Holt ([28:43](#)):

And at the same time, you just said you're dealing with this research or-

General Mark Milley ([28:46](#)):

That's right.

Lester Holt ([28:47](#)):

... its growth in China. Is the military you have right now, is it properly aligned? Are we talking, "Let's go buy some more aircraft carriers to project in the Pacific"? Or how do you approach...

General Mark Milley ([28:59](#)):

Well, we're going to... As we look to the future into this operational environment, and as we see the operational environment changing in a fundamental way, we have got to take a hard look at how our military is organized, the way we fight, how we develop our talent and leadership, the equipment that we have, et cetera. And again, we have multiple problems we have to deal with.

General Mark Milley ([29:24](#)):

So on the one hand, you got an issue with China or Russia, you've got lesser regional challenges with North Korea and Iran for example, and then you've got terrorism. And we have to have many different capabilities in our inventory to deal with all of those simultaneously. With respect to the terrorism piece, we think it's best handled through intelligence capabilities and through Special Forces and CIA and so on. We don't think terrorism is best handled through large conventional forces, et cetera.

General Mark Milley ([29:56](#)):

That's different than, say, China. With China, we're going to need a full panoply of conventional forces, air, land, and sea, but also space and cyber. The domains have expanded over time and one of the areas that concerns me a lot is space and cyber, as we go forward. There are significant capabilities that happen in space today that our economy, our country, and our military entirely depend on. And the same thing with any modern advanced industrial society, same thing with the Chinese for that matter.

General Mark Milley (30:34):

So operations in space and then second to that is cyber, and you'll hear from Paul Nakasone in a little bit. Those are going to be key determiners of who has decisive advantage at the beginning of a conflict, and those are areas that have great concern for us.

Lester Holt (30:52):

You mentioned space. I want to circle back to one of my earlier questions about hypersonic weapons. Is the US in position to have space dominance, or is that at risk?

General Mark Milley (31:05):

Well, again, I don't want to go too much into dominance or not dominance in space. I would just say that space today is a new domain of war, conflict. We don't want to have conflict in space. We've got good systems in space. And I would say that we are the number one country on earth that has capabilities in space, but other countries are close behind. And space is becoming a very contested domain for us to operate in, and our country and other countries are very dependent upon space capabilities.

General Mark Milley (31:49):

You have to think in terms of offense and defense. When things started up in space, or in cyberspace for that matter, people weren't thinking them as... When they design these systems, they weren't looking at it as if it was a militarily contested place. And so, these systems aren't necessarily resilient, robust. They're not... necessarily don't have built-in defensive systems. So that's an area, defense, that is going to have to be significantly improved in both space and cyberspace.

General Mark Milley (32:20):

And then everyone has always said, and it's probably true, I guess, is your best defense is a good offense. So you're going to have to have offensive capabilities also in space and cyberspace in order to make sure that our national interests are preserved. There's a lot of work to be done in those areas.

Lester Holt (32:40):

We're not currently, that I know of, involved in a kinetic war right now. Talk about cybersecurity right now. Are shots being fired, shots being received in a cyber war even as we speak?

General Mark Milley (32:55):

Well, you can get lots more color and detail from Paul Nakasone here in a few minutes, but we are in a very, very contested domain in cyber. And every single day, our nation is literally being hacked, penetrated, espionage, intelligence operations going on all in cyberspace. People are out there trying to steal money from banks and interdict phones and do all kinds of things in cyber. The short answer to your question is, yes. On a daily basis, it happens millions of times a day.

General Mark Milley ([33:35](#)):

The Pentagon has... I don't know how many attempts, but it's an astronomical amount of attempts to get through our systems. So every single day, cyberspace is highly contested by criminals, by non-state actors and terrorists, but also by nation states, to include China and Russia, and we see it every single day. All you got to do is turn on your phone and you'll see it. So it's out there, it's real. Is it kinetic? No. Does it have an effect? Yes. And is it serious? Absolutely.

Lester Holt ([34:07](#)):

All right. I want to talk for a moment about Iran. Obviously, we're seeing a diplomatic awakening now over the nuclear deal. But from a military standpoint, what have you seen in terms of Iran's capabilities with ballistic missiles, and of course the big one, the nuclear research?

General Mark Milley ([34:24](#)):

Again, I'm hesitant to go into too much detail because a lot of it is classified. But with Iran, Iran has been a challenge for the United States since at least the revolution in 1979, and they remain so. Iran does not want, and they know it's not in their interest, to have an open kinetic fight with the United States. That probably wouldn't end well for them, and they know that. So they're very calculated.

General Mark Milley ([34:50](#)):

But at the same time, they do a lot of things in the gray zone and they execute a lot of what we call malign operations throughout the Middle East in the region that are absolutely undermining and against US national interests, to include kinetic actions, terrorist actions through surrogates, and so on. So Iran is a very, very difficult issue for the region and for the United States. We have all kinds of capabilities, and Iran knows that and we're prepared to do whatever the president directs us to do.

Lester Holt ([35:24](#)):

I'm sort of going down your list of some of the challenges. You mentioned earlier, North Korea continues to test weapons of various sorts.

General Mark Milley ([35:33](#)):

Sure.

Lester Holt ([35:33](#)):

What is your level of concern about not only their capability but their intentions with that capability?

General Mark Milley ([35:39](#)):

Again, North Korea is one of the hardest countries on the earth to try to figure out intentions, for a lot of reasons. Mostly because it's a very, very closed totalitarian society. But the South Korean military is very capable, our military is very capable, and you've got also a capability with the Japanese that are there that are very, very capable. So I'm confident that the combined forces of the United States and the Republic of Korea can deal with anything that North Korea has in mind.

General Mark Milley ([36:15](#)):

Having said that, it's one of those areas where you never know. The peninsula is one of those areas that is highly militarized. 70% of the North Korean military is within miles of the DMZ and within miles of Seoul. So bad things could happen on the Korean peninsula on relatively short notice, so we always maintain a very, very high state of readiness with respect to the Korean peninsula.

Lester Holt ([36:39](#)):

What is your level of responsibility with these weapons in terms of their command and control on their internal security? Do we know?

General Mark Milley ([36:45](#)):

Well, I would say that the government of North Korea, at this point in time, appears to be stable and they have good control over their military and their systems and all of their weaponry, et cetera. So I don't think you would see something accidental happen from them. It could, but I don't think that's highly probable. They have a very, very tight control over their system.

Lester Holt ([37:08](#)):

All right. I'm going to open up to questions in a moment, but I do want to ask this on a personal level. You became a bit of a lightning rod recently. We saw your appearances before Congress. Can you tell us how that has impacted your job and if you have any regrets over being as forthcoming as you were with Woodward?

General Mark Milley ([37:27](#)):

Well, I'm a soldier. And my dedication is to the constitution and the country, and I serve at the pleasure of the president. And when the president no longer finds me useful, then I move on. Until that day, I just continue to serve the country and serve the constitution and drive on.

Lester Holt ([37:44](#)):

And do you still feel like you have the open relationship with the president in terms of-

General Mark Milley ([37:48](#)):

Absolutely.

Lester Holt ([37:49](#)):

... as his chief military advisor?

General Mark Milley ([37:50](#)):

Sure. Very good relationship with the president and the secretary of defense and the other members of the national security team.

Lester Holt ([37:55](#)):

Well, you've been great taking my questions. I'd like to open up if I can to-

General Mark Milley ([37:58](#)):

Sure. Absolutely.

Lester Holt ([37:59](#)):

... some of the audience here. Gentleman has his hand up right there, so we'll bring a microphone to you.

Speaker 6 ([38:14](#)):

Thank you. Thank you so much, Chairman Milley. We know this week that CIA Director Bill Burns and a senior administration delegation is in Russia, and following your meeting in late September with General Gerasimov, you had stated to the media that the United States should explore ways to expand its military contacts with Russia as a way to increase trust and avoid a miscalculation, which you've also alluded to here today.

Speaker 6 ([38:38](#)):

Given the high level of exercise and military activity that we're seeing along the borders of NATO and Russia in Europe, should not all NATO nations and the NATO chain of command itself share the burden of increasing trust and avoiding miscalculation with Russia? So in short, would you support a more holistic alliance approach to trying to build trust with Russia, especially considering what we've seen recently in terms of the breakdown in communication between NATO and Russia? Thank you.

General Mark Milley ([39:09](#)):

Yeah. The short answer is, yes. I firmly believe that you should not only talk to your allies and partners and friends, but you absolutely need to talk to your adversaries and your enemies. And I think that we are currently in an era, a period of great power peace, and we want to keep it that way. We want to keep it a great power competition. The last thing this world needs, the last thing the United States needs, or anybody else needs, is a great power war. And so, the extent to which we, the military or NATO through intermediaries or directly, can communicate back and forth with Russia, China, or any other country, I think, is in the plus column of things to do, and I think that's a smart thing to do.

General Mark Milley ([39:58](#)):

With respect to NATO, there are elements of NATO, people in NATO that do communicate directly with Russia. So I communicate at my level, but also Europe and others, Secretary General Stoltenberg and others said there are communication mechanisms back and forth between the United States and Russia and between NATO and Russia.

Lester Holt ([40:22](#)):

Another question. Yes, sir, in the back.

Speaker 7 ([40:23](#)):

Oops, sorry.

Sam Dorman ([40:33](#)):

Thank you. Sam Dorman from Fox News. Thank you for joining us today. And I just want to ask you about, I think, the debate over women being drafted into the military is going to start ramping up again. I know you've endorsed the idea that both sexes should be drafted. And so, I was wondering, there's concerns about basic training results and just the idea of the physical disadvantage for women in

combat. So I wonder if you could address those. And then, I guess, where would women be placed within the military if there was a large scale draft?

General Mark Milley ([41:12](#)):

Yeah. First of all, we have an all-volunteer military. We want to keep it that way. And I am not aware of any serious discussions by anyone about re-instituting drafts or any of that kind of stuff. With respect to women in the military, we've opened up all military occupational specialties to women, and I firmly believe we should. And perhaps not all women will want to be in the infantry, and maybe not all women will meet the standards for the infantry, but some women will.

General Mark Milley ([41:40](#)):

We just had the first woman successfully lead a platoon of rangers in the Ranger Regiment in combat as an infantry officer. We've had 100... I think we're at over 100 women have graduated the US Army Ranger School. We have the first woman in Special Forces. First woman became a SEAL recently. Look, this country is built upon an idea, and the idea says... It's a very simple idea. It's very powerful. It's an idea that the Nazis and the Imperial Japanese and the fascists in Italy and al-Qaeda and al-Shabaab... A lot of people hate this idea, right? But the idea says that you and I are created equal, and it doesn't matter if we're a male or a female, a Catholic, Protestant, Muslim, Jew, doesn't matter. It doesn't matter if you're gay or straight or tall or short or rich or poor. If you meet the standards of the military, you're welcome, and you're on the team.

General Mark Milley ([42:29](#)):

And if you're willing to shed your blood to defend this constitution, then bring it on. Get in uniform and come on. That's the idea that's America. We're all Americans. And you're going to rise or fall based on your level of merit, your hard work, your knowledge, your skills, your attributes, and you're going to be judged by the content of your character. I don't have any problem, and I know that the leadership of the United States military and Department of Defense does not have any problem. We have to do it in smart ways. But all people, regardless of who you are, ought to have an opportunity to succeed in life.

Lester Holt ([43:04](#)):

Another question. Yes, right here. The advantage of being in the front row.

Trudy Rubin ([43:10](#)):

Trudy Rubin from The Philadelphia Inquirer. Our policy towards Taiwan...

Lester Holt ([43:16](#)):

Oh. Actually, we'll get a microphone to you. I'm sorry.

Trudy Rubin ([43:17](#)):

Oh, sorry about that.

Lester Holt ([43:17](#)):

My apologies.

Trudy Rubin ([43:18](#)):

Let me start again. Trudy Rubin from The Philadelphia Inquirer. Our policy towards Taiwan has been one of strategic ambiguity. Now, there is a lot of argument that it should be clarified, the strategic clarity. The administration has been encouraging more UN ties with Taiwan. Are we moving towards strategic clarity on Taiwan in terms of defense, and would that be a dangerous risk?

General Mark Milley ([43:52](#)):

Yeah, and that's a great question, and I'm going to avoid that question. Look, there's advantages and disadvantages to everything, and there are risks associated with everything. So strategic ambiguity with respect to Taiwan, based upon the Taiwan Relations Act and the Three Communiques, has been successful to date. And whether or not that changes as we go forward should be a matter of considered thought and deep deliberation. And this is not the place for me to wax and wane eloquently about that, I don't think. So I think that there's a lot of thought that needs to be put in that. But right now, our policy is what it is, and it'll continue for the foreseeable future.

Lester Holt ([44:40](#)):

Okay. I see some lady back there in her maroon sweater. We'll get the microphone to you. Thank you.

General Mark Milley ([44:55](#)):

While she's grabbing the microphone, Lester, I don't know if you noticed that the Boston Braves won the World Series.

Lester Holt ([45:00](#)):

The Boston Braves?

General Mark Milley ([45:02](#)):

She has the microphone.

Lester Holt ([45:03](#)):

Wonderful.

Jo-Anne Sears ([45:04](#)):

Go Red Sox. Thank you.

General Mark Milley ([45:05](#)):

There you go.

Jo-Anne Sears ([45:07](#)):

A quick question for you. My name is Jo-Anne Sears. I'm from Velocity Government Relations. It's good to see you. Thank you for coming today. I want to talk about the continuing resolution, and I want to talk about the NDAA. Could you give us a perspective on how that affects your ability to lead and our military's ability to do their job when we continue to have these CRs year after year after year? I happen to even be married to a frugal New Englander from Boston, so we live within our budget, but we plan our budget.

Jo-Anne Sears ([45:39](#)):

So how is this affecting your job, sir, and can you offer us any advice on... Or maybe give some advice lovingly to Congress on how to get their CR over and done with so we can actually fund the military? Thank you.

General Mark Milley ([45:54](#)):

Thank you for that. As a matter of routine, CRs are a very inefficient way of managing something as large as the NDAA and the budget for the national defense. And what ends up happening is instead of having a 12-month budget, you end up with an 8-month or a 9-month or a 10-month, and you lose predictability with industry. So if industry can't... If they have to deal with things on a year-to-year basis, CR-to-CR basis, they jack up the price of an individual unit cost sort of thing, so an item is much more expensive.

General Mark Milley ([46:31](#)):

So it's a very inefficient and much more expensive way, and it's very difficult to provide predictability to us, the military or to industry, to provide the equipment that we need. So I continually, and have since I was chief of staff of the Army for six years now, have been arguing for a steady, predictable budget. So I think the continuing use of CRs is not the way to go, but the 535 members of the board of directors, they govern the purse strings for the military, so we take what we get, but it is... I caution I'm an advisor, not a decision-maker, as I get reminded on a daily basis. I would advise to pass the NDAA and stay away from CRs to the extent possible.

Lester Holt ([47:19](#)):

All right. We have about a minute and a half left, so one quick question?

Speaker 11 ([47:22](#)):

I think that's the last question.

Lester Holt ([47:28](#)):

Well, I guess we're going to think that's the last question. General Milley, chairman, thank you so much for doing this.

General Mark Milley ([47:30](#)):

Lester, thank you. Appreciate it.

Lester Holt ([47:37](#)):

It's a real pleasure. Thank you. And thank you for your questions. I guess we'll...

Speaker 12 ([47:40](#)):

Thank you so much.

General Mark Milley ([47:40](#)):

Thanks, everybody.

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Speaker 12 ([47:41](#)):

General Milley, Lester Holt, thank you for covering the waterfront. So to speak here on the waterfront, we really appreciate you taking time out and coming.

Lester Holt ([47:49](#)):

Thank you.

Speaker 12 ([47:50](#)):

Thank you very much.

General Mark Milley ([47:50](#)):

Great. Thanks.

Lester Holt ([47:50](#)):

Pleasure. Appreciate it.

General Mark Milley ([47:51](#)):

Thanks, sir.

Speaker 12 ([47:51](#)):

And now I'd like...

Lester Holt ([47:54](#)):

[inaudible 00:47:54].

General Mark Milley ([47:57](#)):

Yeah.

Speaker 12 ([47:57](#)):

I'd now like to invite Roy...