



Gen. Milley's 'Assurances' to China: Reckless Endangerment, not Prudent Precaution

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Leaks to the media from Bob Woodward and Robert Costa's new book, *Peril*, generated widespread anger about the alleged behavior of Gen. Mark A. Milley, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. One revelation – that Milley communicated secretly with Gen. Li Zuocheng, the head of China's military – has generated charges of malfeasance, if not outright treason, especially among conservatives in the United States.

The book leaves little doubt that Milley was terrified about what he saw as Trump's erratic and intemperate behavior, especially during the weeks following the 2020 election. According to Woodward and Costa, the general was specifically concerned that a president he believed to be mentally unstable might order an attack on either Iran or China. Indeed, he was so alarmed about the latter possibility, since it could plunge the two countries into nuclear war, that he secretly contacted Gen. Li on two occasions to apprise him of developments in Washington, and to assure him that steps were being taken to prevent that possibility. On the first of those calls (on October 30, 2020), Milley reportedly told his Chinese counterpart that if Trump nevertheless moved to carry out such an attack on the PRC, Milley would let Li know, so that the attack would not come as a surprise.

If true, that would have been an astonishing action by any American military figure, much less the JCS chairman. The reports immediately led to accusations that Milley committed treason, and demands that he should not only be fired, but also prosecuted for that offense. Most of the calls have come from conservative critics of the of the Biden administration, but there have been a few from surprising sources. Retired Lt. Col. Alexander S. Vindman, a renowned Trump hater and the star witness at House committee hearings during the first attempt to impeach and remove the president, stated bluntly that if the reports of such contacts with China's military leader prove true, Milley should be fired. In a subsequent op-ed in the *Washington Post*, Vindman stressed that the general ought to have resigned if he had so little confidence in Trump's continued role as commander-in-chief of the armed forces.

Biden, however, has thus far stood firmly behind the beleaguered general. "I have great confidence in General Milley," Biden told reporters. White House press secretary Jen Psaki even insisted that Milley had acted appropriately.

Milley's defenders in the administration and elsewhere have adopted two somewhat contradictory arguments. One is that the significance of the calls to Li have been "greatly exaggerated" and that such contacts between the heads of rival militaries are not that unusual and provide a constructive dialogue to reduce tensions. Milley himself insists that the calls were well within the scope of his job. The other, bolder defense is that JCS chief is a brave patriot who may have prevented a dangerously unstable president from starting a nuclear war.

If Milley did indeed make such calls without Trump's knowledge – especially if the Woodward and Costa account of the substance of the earlier call is accurate—it is very difficult to justify either defense. *RealityChek* blogger and former *Foreign Policy* associate editor Alan Tonelson notes that "the first of two phone calls to Beijing was made October 30, before Election Day and well before Trump set off alarm bells with his behavior in the voting's aftermath." Tonelson raises some other troubling points, asking "what if Milley was simply worried" that Trump might try [to launch an attack], with "no concrete evidence, or less-than-conclusive evidence? Just because he thought Trump was crazy. Would he have warned China in this circumstance?" If so, such a warning would have given Beijing both time and incentive to launch a preemptive strike.

Tonelson's last comment underscores an important point. Tensions already were high throughout the region because of competing shows of force by the PRC and the United States and its allies in the South China Sea, the East China Sea, and the Taiwan Strait. For America's top general to offer a bizarre promise of giving advance notice of an attack by his own country was more likely to arouse rather than alleviate suspicions on the part of Chinese military and political leaders. It would be difficult for them to believe that Milley would commit such an indisputable act of treason. Instead, they might well have concluded that a U.S. full-scale attack was coming and that Milley's assurance was merely part of a sophisticated disinformation effort to lull Chinese military units into complacency. If so, Beijing then would have had a powerful incentive to strike first, rather than risk having its forces devastated in a U.S. first strike.

If the Woodward and Costa account of the October 30 call is true (and until confirmed, some uncertainty necessarily exists), Milley's behavior was both clueless and reckless. Good intentions are not enough. Such a weird offer of reassurance could well have triggered the very war that Milley insisted he sought to prevent.

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