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REMEMBERING AN

‘ICONIC’ APPEAL

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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

Remembering an 'Iconic' Act of Courage in Beijing, 24 Years Later

One man shares how joining an appeal for freedom of belief in communist China was the proudest moment of his life

TERRI WU

On the evening of April 24 more than two decades ago, Shao Changyong, a Falun Gong practitioner, went to his daily gathering with fellow adherents as usual.

His group had about 10 members, and one woman offered her home in Beijing as a meeting place. They usually read from a book on Falun Gong, a spiritual practice involving meditative exercises and moral teachings based on the tenets of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance.

Shao still remembers that evening. "Let's not study the book tonight. I have some news," their host said, he recalled.

She told the group about the idea of going to Zhongnanhai, the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP's) headquarters in the heart of Beijing, to demand the release of dozens of fellow practitioners who had been detained in the megacity Tianjin.

In the months and years leading up to April 24, 1999, Falun Gong adherents had faced growing restrictions on their freedoms. For about a week, adherents had peacefully protested a slanderous article published by Tianjin University's School of Education. The city responded by dispatching anti-riot forces on April 24 and arresting more than 40 practitioners.

Before the Tianjin incident, state-owned television and newspapers had run content vilifying the faith, which by 1999 had an estimated 70 million to 100 million adherents in China.

Between 1999 and 2015, Shao lost his job and marriage, and suffered for two years in a labor camp as a result of the persecution. He managed to escape from China and arrive in the United States in 2015. He doesn't regret joining the 1999 appeal. 'It is a highlight of my life,' he said.

Tianjin, about 85 miles from Beijing, is another city directly governed by central authorities. So, the natural next step was to bring the matter to the CCP's central bodies in the capital.

Shao said his first reaction was to speak to the CCP central committee to call for the Tianjin practitioners' release.

But once he returned home and began to prepare to petition the next day, the pressure started building.

Shao, who was 28 at the time, was an armed police officer who taught calculus at the Beijing Command Academy of the People's Armed Police (PAP), the CCP's paramilitary wing. He knew the armed police force was supposed to be loyal to the Party, and visiting Zhongnanhai as a petitioner could mean losing his job.

As a career military member and a graduate of the Engineering University of the People's Armed Police, losing his job would mean the end of his career and his family's livelihood.

Shao had a vague thought in his mind that the next day would be a turning point in his life. He thought that the consequences of his choice to petition could occur as early as the next workday: He might be pressed to the floor as soon as he returned to his job at the academy.

Setting aside the fear, he took a taxi to Zhongnanhai and arrived nearby around 5 a.m. on April 25.

When he crossed the street to get to his destination, a policeman was there to persuade Falun Gong practitioners not to continue. Shao said police knew what was happening, as some practitioners were already outside Zhongnanhai.

The officer told people that they were "making a serious mistake." When several responded that China's constitution guaranteed freedom of belief, they were scoffed at. "What is law?" the officer said, as Shao recalled. "I'm the law."

Shao knew the officer was telling the truth. From his professional knowledge,



Falun Gong practitioners participate in a parade to call for an end to the Chinese Communist Party's persecution of their faith, in the Flushing neighborhood of Queens, N.Y., on April 23, 2023.

he could see plainclothes police officers among the crowd. Some even looked familiar to him.

At about 7 a.m., he went into a nearby alleyway for breakfast. When he finished eating, he heard a commotion among the crowd. His first reaction was, "Could this be a repeat of the 1989 Tiananmen Square massacre?"

After all, Tiananmen Square, where college students asking for greater freedoms were massacred by the CCP military a decade earlier, was only about a 10-minute drive away.

Instead, he saw then-Premier Zhu Rongji greeting Falun Gong practitioners. Shao recalled that a practitioner standing next to him was from northeastern China. That man said his only pursuit was to be able to freely practice his belief; he didn't mind a meager life.

Being surrounded by fellow adherents calmed Shao. More than 10,000 lined up outside the compound that day. The atmosphere, he recalled, was surprisingly tranquil. His mind became clear as the fear dissipated.

Later in the day, Zhu met a group of Falun Gong delegates and assured them of his support. The crowd of Falun Gong practitioners then dispersed. Shao got home at about 8 p.m. He had to work the next day.

Unlike what he'd imagined, Shao wasn't pressed to the floor when he returned to work the following Monday. Instead, the academy collected the names of officers who practiced Falun Gong and who had joined the April 25 appeal. Then, several days later, the academy organized an all-

hands meeting for a lecture by a professor of philosophy, who told them that the CCP central committee had decided to label Falun Gong as a heretical organization.

Three months later, the CCP launched a nationwide campaign to eradicate the practice, overnight on July 20, 1999.

Since then, millions of Falun Gong adherents have been held in labor camps, mental asylums, drug rehabilitation centers, unofficial black jails, and other detention facilities. The vilification, torture, and organized killing through forced organ harvesting

arising from the persecution have led to an untold number of deaths. Those who survive are left with injuries and financial and psychological impairment suffered from the abuses.

The View From America

He Bin, a software engineer and a Falun Gong practitioner, was a 31-year-old graduate student at the University of Maryland, majoring in telecommunications at the time of the 1999 appeal.

Back then, there was no email list or web-

site to find out about Falun Gong-related news; He learned about the appeal during a weekly gathering with fellow practitioners, when they usually read the main text of the practice, "Zhuang Falun."

He remembered that all were relieved that the petition was resolved peacefully.

When the CCP launched its persecution three months later, he was taken by surprise. Like other adherents, he then began his journey of "truth clarification"—a term used by Falun Gong practitioners that means dispelling falsehoods about

the practice disseminated by the CCP's propaganda machine.

Clarifying the truth to Chinese people hasn't been easy throughout the years, he said, because money is valued much more than freedom in modern Chinese society.

But after COVID-19 hit, especially this year, he noticed that his efforts had appeared to become easier, since recent events had triggered an awakening in China.

Speaking at a rally outside the Chinese Embassy in Washington this week, He

recalled that back in 1999, petitioners of various backgrounds would go to Beijing to appeal over monetary issues such as lost retirement benefits, land disputes, or being forced to leave their homes.

"However, the appeal of Falun Gong practitioners was for freedom of belief. It's for people's spiritual needs—a taboo in Chinese society," he said. "Doing that required even more courage."

In a society ruled by the CCP, any petitions are usually met with retaliation. In a society where generations were brought up under communist education, people who put their comfortable lives at risk by seeking freedom could easily be considered lunatics.

However, that changed with the pandemic, and because of the CCP's draconian lockdown policies that saw hundreds of millions of citizens sealed inside their homes, on and off, for almost two years.

The result was a humanitarian catastrophe. Residents struggled to obtain basic food and supplies, grappled with the psychological toll of being trapped inside their homes for prolonged periods, and were denied access to medical care.

Then, in November 2022, a fire in a high-rise building in the capital of China's western Xinjiang region, where some residents had lived under lockdown for more than 100 days, took the lives of about a dozen residents.

That became the spark that ignited nationwide protests.

Young protesters around the country held up blank pieces of paper and chanted slo-



Shao Changyong encourages Chinese people to quit the Chinese Communist Party, in the Flushing neighborhood of New York on July 14, 2017.



Zhang Erping participates in a rally to call for an end to the Chinese Communist Party's persecution of Falun Gong, in the Flushing neighborhood of New York on April 23, 2023.

A 24-YEAR-LONG PERSECUTION CAMPAIGN

Meditation practiced in more than 100 countries targeted in China

Falun Gong is based on the values of truthfulness, compassion, and tolerance. It's been persecuted in China since 1999.

100 MILLION

Falun Gong is practiced by an estimated 100 million people around the world, with the teachings having been translated into 40 languages.

gans such as "End zero-COVID," "We want human rights," and "Down with the Communist Party!"

It was a bold display of defiance by the general populace not seen since the Tiananmen protests three decades earlier.

For He, the CCP's heightened repression of the populace during the pandemic retroactively underscored the importance of the appeal in 1999.

He hails the 10,000 adherents who went to Zhongnanhai as pioneers who stood up for what they believed in.

"Doing that in China takes tremendous courage and faith," he said. "Falun Gong practitioners took the step when there was an opportunity for a fundamental direction change for Chinese society."

Unfortunately, the CCP chose persecution.

'A Highlight of My Life'

Between 1999 and 2015, Shao lost his job and marriage, and suffered for two years in a labor camp as a result of the persecution. He managed to escape from China and arrive in the United States in 2015.

He doesn't regret joining the 1999 appeal. "It is a highlight of my life," Shao told The Epoch Times. "I'm honored to have joined the event. April 25, 1999, is a day I'm most proud of myself."

The April 25 appeal was "unprecedented" because "it was the first-ever peaceful action taken by Chinese civilians from all walks of life to seek freedom of expression, association, and conscience—these are rights articulated in China's constitution," said Zhang Erping, a spokesperson for Falun Gong.

"The courageous action is now widely supported and praised by many Chinese people because they are now recognizing that [the April 25 demonstration] actually defended the basic human right of every Chinese citizen and, above all, defended the principles of truth, compassion, and tolerance—the fundamental values of humanity," he said.

Greg Copley, president of the International Strategic Studies Association, spoke about the significance of the April 25 appeal in a recent interview with NTD, a sister media outlet of The Epoch Times.

"I think it is something that China watchers and the Falun Gong community itself need to memorialize and celebrate ... to reduce, if you like, the message of that to something iconic," he said.

"Every society that succeeds has a saga of its society, a saga of heroism, of resistance, of nobility. And this canon should be one of the great symbols which permeates the Chinese people at home and abroad and should also inspire supporters of the Chinese people in their resistance.

"I think to do that, it's worth writing the saga of that protest in such a way that it is seen as a milestone event in Chinese history, one which will spell the start of the decline of the Communist Party of China."

Eva Fu contributed to this report.

CCP INFLUENCE | IN-DEPTH

The Real Reason Behind China's \$10 Billion Offer to Taliban for Lithium

VENUS UPADHAYAYA

A Chinese company has offered the Taliban \$10 billion and a proposal to build key strategic infrastructure connecting north-south Afghanistan in exchange for access to the country's lithium reserves. Some experts raised concerns that the offer would allow the Chinese regime to expand its influence in the region.

The proposal was discussed between a representative of Gochin and the acting minister of the Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum, Sheikh Hadith Shahabuddin Delawar, in his office on April 13. The talks happened just a few months after the Taliban arrested two Chinese nationals trying to smuggle 1,000 metric tons of lithium-bearing rocks out of the country.

Experts said it needs to be seen if the deal is feasible, but once signed, it will have diplomatic and political ramifications, and the proposed infrastructure development will likely have a long-term strategic impact.

"Geopolitically, this deal could give China a significant advantage and influence in the region, as it secures a supply of critical resources and strengthens its presence in Afghanistan," Maher Saadat, an exiled activist and Afghan affairs analyst, told The Epoch Times in an email.

Afghanistan's lithium reserves potentially rival those of Bolivia, which has the world's most significant amount of lithium resources. The Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum said in a press release that the deal, once executed, will provide direct employment to 120,000 people and indirectly to 1 million.

Abhishek Darbey, a research associate of the Chinese Research Program at the New Delhi-based Center for China Analysis and Strategy (CCAS), pointed out to The Epoch Times in an email that China is among the first countries that supported the Taliban to form a government in Kabul following the withdrawal of the United States from the country. He believes the Chinese regime wants to control the region.



A factory worker at Xinwangda Electric Vehicle Battery Co. Ltd., which makes lithium batteries for electric cars and other uses, in Nanjing in China's eastern Jiangsu Province, on March 12, 2021.

Geopolitically, this deal could give China a significant advantage and influence in the region.

Maher Saadat, an exiled activist and Afghan affairs analyst

socio-economic development and stability of the country with certainty," he said.

The first lithium mine was discovered in Ghazni city in 2013. These rare mineral mines are located in five areas in Afghanistan: Herat, Shuryak Valley, Tagab District in Kapisa Province, Nawur District in Ghazni Province, and Badakhshan.

Darbey said the Chinese interest in the region is not new—in 2021, two Chinese companies were sent to Ghazni to conduct technical research and inspect lithium and gold mines.

While China's lithium reserves are depleting, the Afghan deposits are unexploited. Five Chinese companies have set up their representative offices in Afghanistan, and around 20 Chinese companies have made inquiries about lithium projects, according to Darbey.

Delawar said that the contract of the mines in Afghanistan would be given according to the Taliban's law.

Darbey pointed out that the Taliban government is already supporting Chinese investment in its wider mining sector, and China's two largest lithium miners—Tianqi and Ganfeng—have already examined the lithium mines in Afghanistan.

Infrastructure Development

The Taliban's Ministry of Mines and Petroleum said in its press release that the Chinese had proposed developing three infrastructure projects: the Salang Tunnel that connects north Afghanistan with Kabul, the Nuristan highway that connects Kunar to Laghman, and a power dam project.

"The Chinese side has said that they will repair Salang Pass for smooth transportation between China and Afghanistan for the purpose of mining and other activities," Darbey said.

Gochin has proposed to repair the Salang Pass—a lifeline of Afghanistan—in seven months and carve another tunnel over the pass.

The fight for Salang Pass has been an important part of Afghanistan's war history because of its strategic location on the



Vehicles and rescue teams at the site of a deadly oil tanker fire at the Salang Pass tunnel in Parwan Province, Afghanistan, on Dec. 19, 2022.

map—the Soviet Union and the United States used it to move military troops. Today the pass is important for the Taliban's military movement.

The first construction for the two-lane Salang highway across the Hindukush mountains, which included creating a 1.7-mile-long tunnel at the Salang Pass at 3,400 meters above sea level, was undertaken by the Soviets in the 1960s.

The narrowness of the Salang Pass is one of the factors responsible for the chaotic U.S. withdrawal from the country, according to Saadat, who said that the U.S. military heavily relied on airlifting supplies because it was difficult to move heavy equipment through the pass.

"This airlifting was not only logistically challenging but also economically expensive, which added to the overall cost of the U.S. military presence in Afghanistan," he said, adding that the high cost of the war in Afghanistan was one of the main reasons the United States left the country.

Today the Taliban controls the crucial transportation route for moving fighters and supplies across the country because they have complete control over the Salang Tunnel, making it indispensable for the Taliban's military operations, according to Saadat.

"Additionally, the Nuristan Highway and Power Dam provide the Taliban with an opportunity to control the region's infrastructure, which can be used to exert power and influence over the local population," he said.

The Taliban had last year announced

that tariffs on freight traffic would generate \$341 million in its treasury. Saadat said that the Chinese-proposed projects could also generate revenue through taxation and extortion, which can be used to fund Taliban activities and consolidate its power.

Darbey said that with more Chinese infrastructure projects, it's likely that the Chinese will train Taliban troops to improve their security apparatus in a short amount of time.

"The possibility of sending Chinese security troops in the region also cannot be undermined," he said.

The overall situation could also create tensions with other countries that have interests in the region, potentially leading to conflicts or strained international relations, according to Saadat.

"Furthermore, it could lead to China creating a debt trap for the Taliban, increasing its economic leverage in Afghanistan and potentially affecting the geopolitical dynamics in the region," he said.

Connection With Central Asia

Experts said the proposed infrastructure development would help improve Afghanistan's connectivity with Central Asia, benefiting China.

Saadat said that by offering to repair the Salang Pass in seven months, China is offering the Taliban a crucial transportation route that connects Kabul to the Central Asian market through Hairatan.

Hairatan is a town in the northern Balkh Province of Afghanistan and borders Uzbekistan. It was through the same borders that landlocked Uzbekistan, which hosted the U.S.-led coalition forces in 2001 that toppled the Taliban after 9/11.

After the Taliban took over in 2021, Uzbekistan continued to do business with Afghanistan through the same border as its firms sought a path through Afghanistan to ports in Pakistan and Iran.

The Taliban is also a part of the "East-West Railway Corridor project" that stretches from China to Europe through Iran and Afghanistan, and a north-south connection through Salang is important for the overall navigation map of Central Asia that China is developing.

"The importance of Salang Pass for the Taliban is that they cannot do it themselves, and it would enable them to access and export the lithium deposits, which they see as a quick source of money," he said.

Challenges

Although China has a number of investors willing to invest in Afghan lithium reserves, they will face challenges and risks, including a treacherous topography and increasing terrorist attacks, according to the experts.

"First, throughout the year, harsh climatic conditions prevail over the geographical location of Wakhan Corridor connecting the two countries, and the region remains snow-covered for at least nine months," Darbey said.

The Chinese regime will have to improve its logistics across this region to ensure the smooth transportation of raw lithium from the mines of Afghanistan to China. He said that improving transport facilities might not be challenging for the Chinese because they have experience building logistics systems in similar terrain in Tibet and Xinjiang.

The other challenge is ISIS. Since November 2021, ISIS has launched 248 attacks, and in retaliation, the Taliban government has conducted 132 military operations against it, according to Darbey. He said that despite all the counter operations, the Chinese nationals in Afghanistan are not safe.

"Though the Taliban government has repeatedly spoken to ensure [the] security of the Chinese investment and investors' lives, it still has a long way to go before it guarantees the safety and security of the Chinese citizens working in the mining industries."



(L-R) Lawmakers in a new House select committee on China Rep. Jake Auchincloss (D-Mass.), Rep. Haley Stevens (D-Mich.), committee Chairman Rep. Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.), and Rep. Carlos Gimenez (R-Fla.) gather for a tabletop war game exercise in the House Ways and Means Committee room in Washington on April 19, 2023.

NATIONAL SECURITY

Lawmakers' Wargame Shows 'Catastrophic' Results in US-China Conflict

ANDREW THORNEBROOKE

Lawmakers tasked with overseeing the United States' strategic competition with China's communist regime have conducted a wargame simulating a Chinese invasion of Taiwan and the U.S. response.

The House Select Committee on Strategic Competition with the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) participated in the wargame, hosted by the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) think tank on April 19.

"We're going to explore what happens in the very grim scenario in which deterrence fails in the Indo-Pacific," Select Committee Chair Mike Gallagher (R-Wis.) said according to prepared remarks.

"This is not a possibility we wish to contemplate, but one we must."

We recognize the paradox of deterrence: that to achieve peace, sometimes you must prepare for conflict.

Mike Gallagher, congressman

'Sobering Lessons'

The wargame sought to examine the potential course of events that could take place should the CCP invade Taiwan in 2027, with the Select Committee members playing for the United States and CNAS experts playing for China.

Over two and a half hours, the wargame simulated high-level strategic and operational maneuvers from both sides, including diplomatic, economic, and military actions in which the U.S. side sought to counter the CCP invasion.

The game was ultimately cut short because of time constraints, but its conclusions nevertheless presented the Select Committee with a sobering reality: Resupplying Taiwan with arms and other critical supplies after a CCP blockade had been imposed was not possible.

Likewise, without additional basing options with regional allies, the U.S. side risked immense casualties and its stockpiles of long-range missiles being depleted in short order.

Therefore, Gallagher said that the only solution was to deter a CCP invasion "to the teeth" now, or allow for CCP conquest later.

"We recognize the paradox of deterrence: that to achieve peace, sometimes you must prepare for conflict," Gallagher said.

"I know the members of this committee will dig into the lessons we can learn from what may be some sobering outcomes of this game."

China-US War 'Catastrophic for Humanity'

Rep. Ro Khanna (D-Calif.), who also participated in the wargame, said that the experiment allowed the

Select Committee to come to better grips with just how devastating a war between the world's two largest economies would be.

"The overall lesson is that a war with China would be devastating and catastrophic for humanity," Khanna said during an interview with NBC.

"There is no winner in this."

Khanna noted that, in the wargame, the United States and China do not have open lines of communication, leading to increased escalations. This reflects the fact that the U.S. and China do not engage in virtually any of the protocols used by the United States and Soviet Union to manage crises during the first Cold War.

Likewise, for every consequence the United States was willing to impose on China in the game, the CCP regime had its own response prepared.

In response to being booted from the SWIFT international banking system, for example, the Chinese side cut the United States off from all Chinese battery technology, used in everything from iPhones to electric vehicles.

"They're factoring in all of the economic consequences," Khanna said, adding that the CNAS team did well in accurately portraying CCP decision-making.

CCP Preparing for War

The CCP claims that Taiwan is a part of China that must be united with its rule by any means necessary. CCP leader Xi Jinping has ordered the military wing of the party to achieve the capability to invade and conquer Taiwan by 2027.

That fact, Gallagher said, was reason enough for Congress to begin more seriously contending with the devastating scenario.

"Xi Jinping is not shy about sharing his intentions to take Taiwan—through political warfare if possible, through actual warfare if necessary," Gallagher said.

"The People's Liberation Army has been preparing for a Taiwan invasion for decades. The PLA rocket force and PLA Navy are purpose-built for cross-strait battle and for denying regional access to Taiwan's friends."

To that end, Gallagher said that the only way to deter a CCP invasion of the island was to arm Taiwan and take other, decisive actions to mitigate the CCP's ability to wage war.

"We seek peace and stability in the Taiwan Strait, and the continuation of a relationship that has enabled both Taiwan and China to grow their economies and integrate their societies with the world through high-tech commerce."

"Detering war is the only path to peace and stability, and it is incumbent upon elected officials to take decisive action to do so before it's too late," Gallagher said.

Afghanistan's acting first deputy prime minister Abdul Ghani Baradar (L) and China's ambassador to Afghanistan Wang Yu attend a press conference to announce an oil extraction contract with a Chinese company in Kabul on Jan. 5, 2023.



AHMAD SAHEL ARMAN/AFP VIA GETTY IMAGES

NATIONAL SECURITY | IN-DEPTH

'It Is Skynet'

Pentagon Envisions Robot Armies in a Decade

The Pentagon's quest for an AI-dominated battlefield is becoming a reality

ANDREW THORNEBROOKE

WASHINGTON—Robotic killing machines prowl the land, the skies, and the seas. They are fully automated, seeking out and engaging with adversarial robots across every domain of war. Their human handlers are relegated to the rearward, overseeing the action at a distance while conflicts are fought and won by machines.

Far from science fiction, this is the vision of Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman Gen. Mark Milley.

The United States, according to Milley, is in the throes of one of the myriad revolutions in military affairs that have spanned history.

Such revolutions have spanned from the invention of the stirrup to the adoption of the firearm to the deployment of mechanized maneuver warfare and, now, to the mass fielding of robotics and artificial intelligence (AI).

It is a shift in the character of war, Milley believes, greater than any to have come before.

"Today we are in ... probably the biggest change in military history," Milley said during a March 31 discussion with Defense One.

"We're at a pivotal moment in history from a military standpoint. We're at what amounts to a fundamental change in the very character of war."

Robotic Armies in 10 Years

Many would no doubt be more comfortable with the idea of robots battling for the control of Earth if it were in a science-fiction novel or on a movie screen rather than on the list of priorities of the military's highest-ranking officer.

Milley believes, however, that the world's most powerful armies will be predominantly robotic within the next decade, and he means for the United States to be the first across that cybernetic Rubicon.

"Over the next ten to fifteen years, you'll see large portions of advanced countries' militaries become robotic," Milley said. "If you add robotics with artificial intelligence and precision munitions and the ability to see at range, you've got the mix of a real fundamental change."

"That's coming. Those changes, that technology ... we are looking at inside of 10 years."

That means that the United States has "five to seven years to make some fundamental modifications to our military," Milley says, because the nation's adversaries are seeking to deploy robotics and AI in the same manner, but with Americans in their sights.

The nation that gets there first, that deploys robotics and AI together in a cohesive way, he says, will dominate the next war.

"I would submit that the country, the nation-state, that takes those technologies and adapts them most effectively and optimizes them for military operations, that country is probably going to have a decisive advantage at the beginning of the next conflict," Milley said.

The global consequences of such a shift in the character of war are difficult to overstate.

Milley compared the ongoing struggle to form a new way of war to the competition that occurred between the world wars.

In that era, Milley says, all the nations of Europe had access to new technologies ranging from mechanized vehicles to radio to chemical weapons. All of them could have developed the unified concept of maneuver warfare that replaced the attrition warfare which had defined World War I.

But only one, he said, first integrated their use into a bona fide new way of war.

"That country, Nazi Germany, overran Europe in a very, very short period of time ... because they were able to take those technologies and put them together in a doctrine which we now know as Blitzkrieg," he said.

Blitzkrieg 2040

Milley, and the Pentagon with him, hopes to do the same now by bringing together

The question is, what could possibly go wrong with this situation? Well, a lot.

John Mills; former director of cybersecurity policy, strategy, and international affairs; Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense



emergent capabilities like robotics, AI, cyber and space platforms, and precision munitions into a cohesive doctrine of war.

By being the first to integrate these technologies into a new concept, Milley says, the United States can rule the future battlefield.

To that end, the Pentagon is experimenting with new unmanned aerial, ground, and undersea vehicles, as well as seeking to exploit the pervasiveness of non-military smart technologies from watches to fitness trackers.

Though the effort is just gaining traction, Milley has in fact claimed since 2016 that the U.S. military would field substantial robotic ground forces and AI capabilities by 2030.

Just weeks from now, that idea will begin to truly culminate, when invitations from the Defense Department (DoD) go out to leaders across the defense, tech, and academic spheres for the Pentagon's first-ever conference on building "trusted AI and autonomy" for future wars.

The Pentagon is on a correlating hiring spree, seeking to pay six figures annually for experts willing and able to develop and integrate technologies including "augmented reality, artificial intelligence, human state monitoring, and autonomous unmanned systems."

Like the U.S. Army Futures Command, created in 2018, maintains as a critical goal the designing of what it calls "Army 2040." In other words, the AI-dependent, robotic military of the future.

Though slightly further out than Milley's assumption of 10 to 15 years, Futures Command deputy commanding general Lt. Gen. Ross Coffman believes that 2040 will mark the United States' true entry into an age characterized by artificially intelligent killing machines.

Speaking at a March 28 summit of DoD leaders and technology experts, Coffman described the partnership between man and machine that he envisions for the future, relating it to the relationship between a dog and its master.

Rather than having AI help soldiers get into the fight, however, Coffman believes humans will be helping machines to the battlefield.

"I think we're going to see a flip in 2040," Coffman said, "where humans are doing those functions that allow the machine to

get into a position of relative advantage, not the machine getting humans into a position of relative advantage."

'Everything Spins Out of Control' Remaking the American military and forming a new, cohesive way of war is a tall order. It is nevertheless one that the Pentagon appears prepared to pay for.

The DoD is requesting a record \$1.8 billion in funding for AI projects for the next year alone. That amount will exceed the estimated \$1.6 billion in AI investments being made by China's military.

Much of it is also earmarked for initiatives to improve the decision-making of autonomous weapons systems.

The effort appears at the very least to be a real start toward Milley's vision of fielding autonomous systems en masse. It also raises deep concerns about what the next war could look like, and whether the very much human DoD leadership is adequately prepared for managing its autonomous creations.

John Mills, former director of cybersecurity policy, strategy, and international affairs at the Office of the U.S. Secretary of Defense, believes that this path is rife with the potential for unintended consequences.

"It is Skynet," Mills told The Epoch Times, referencing the fictional AI that conquers the world in "The Terminator" movie franchise. "It is the realization of a Skynet-like environment."

"The question is, what could possibly go wrong with this situation? Well, a lot."

Mills doesn't believe AI deserves all the mystique it's been given in popular culture, but he is concerned about the apparent trend in military decision-making toward building systems with real autonomy. That is, systems capable of making the decision to kill without first obtaining human approval.

"[AI] sounds dark and mysterious, but it's really big data, the ability to ingest and analyze that data with big analytics, and the key thing now is to action that data, often without human interaction," Mills said.

The loss of this "man-in-the-loop" in many proposed future technologies is thus a cause for concern.

Training human beings to correctly identify between friend and foe before engaging

in kinetic action is complicated enough, Mills believes. Much more so with machines.

"What's different now is the ability to action these incredible data sets autonomously and without human interaction," Mills said.

"The integration of AI with autonomous vehicles, and letting them action independently without human decision-making, that's where everything spins out of control."

To that end, Mills expressed concern about what a future conflict might look like between the United States and its allies, and China in the Indo-Pacific.

Imagine, he said, an undersea battlespace in which autonomous submarines and other weapons systems littered the seas.

Fielded by Chinese, American, Korean, Australian, Indian, and Japanese forces, the resulting chaos would likely end with autonomous systems engaging in war throughout the region, while manned ves-

sels held back and sought to best launch the next group of robotic war machines. Anything else would risk putting real lives in the way of the automated killers.

"How do you plan for engagement scenarios with autonomous undersea vehicles?" Mills said

"This is going to be absolute chaos in sub-surface warfare."

Automated Killing

To be sure, preventing the automated killing of combatants by artificially intelligent systems is something the Pentagon has thought about for a long time.

The 2018 Artificial Intelligence Strategy, for example, sought to accelerate AI adoption across the DoD while seeking ethical approaches to "reduce unintentional harm."

The 2020 Ethical Principles for Artificial Intelligence, likewise sought to ensure that only "trustworthy" and "governable" AI technologies were adopted by the military.

The 2022 Responsible Artificial Intelligence Strategy and Implementation Pathway, meanwhile, outlined a plan to mitigate the unintended consequences that could result from the deployment of AI in military systems.

None of these efforts, however, actually will prevent the adoption of fully autonomous killing machines. Indeed, they were never intended to.

That's because all such documents were crafted under the guidance of DoD Directive 3000.09, the Pentagon's guiding document for the development of autonomous weapons systems.

"That's foundational," Mills said of the document. "It's very important because it drives development."

Originally issued in 2012, the document just received a major overhaul in January, meant to prepare the Pentagon for what DoD Director of Emerging Capabilities Policy Michael Horowitz said at the time was a "dramatic, expanded vision for the role of artificial intelligence in the future of the American military."

There is just one caveat to that ethical, trustworthy, governable, deployment of lethal AI systems: The Pentagon does not have any hard and fast rules to prohibit autonomous systems from killing.

Indeed, while 3000.09 is often referenced by proponents of man-in-the-loop technologies, the document does not actually



U.S. carrier group in the Philippine Sea on Sept. 19, 2021.

promote such technologies, nor does it prohibit the use of fully automated lethal systems.

Instead, the document outlines a series of rigorous reviews that proposed autonomous systems must go through. And, while no independent AI weapon systems have made it through that process yet, the future is likely to see many such systems.

This is in no small part to the fact that China's communist regime is rapidly working to field its own automated killing machines, and the DoD will have to prepare to meet that threat head-on, all the while attempting to retain American values.

"[China is] trying to address these hard problems also, of allowing [AI] to engage without human intervention," Mills said.

"I think their proclivity is to allow it even if they accidentally kill their own people."

To that end, the next war may well be one fought primarily between artificially intelligent robots, with human handlers standing at the sidelines, trying their best to direct the action.

Whether the United States can manage that without losing control of its creations, remains to be seen.

Mills is hopeful that, if anyone can do it, it is the United States. After all, he says, we have the best human talent.

"I think we still have enough guardrails where it will be iterative, so that we can become smarter and learn to build into the algorithms precautions and control measures," Mills said.

"I think we have good teams and people in place."

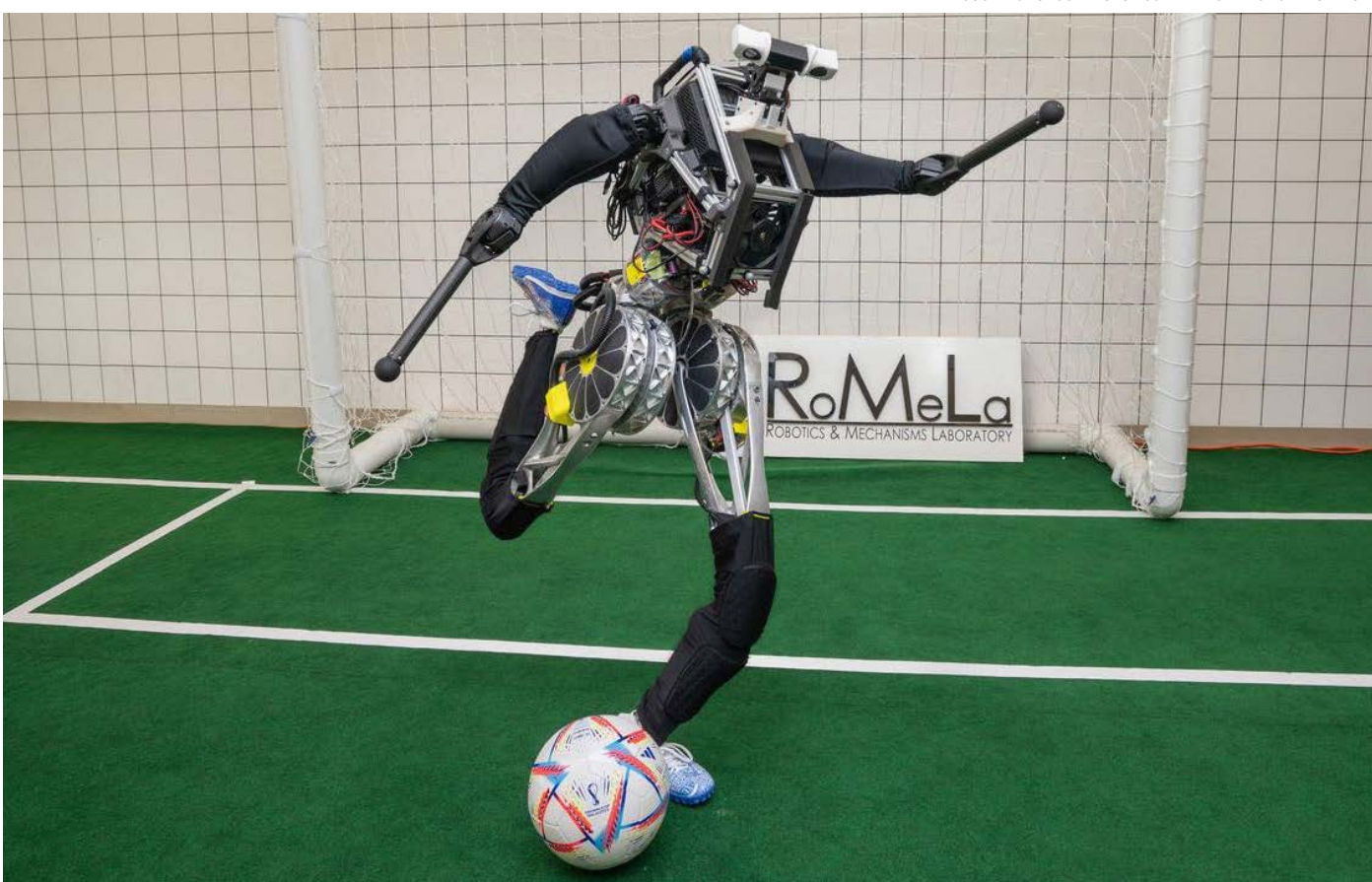
The Epoch Times has reached out to the Pentagon for comment.

The DoD is requesting a record \$1.8 billion in funding for AI projects for the next year alone. That amount will exceed the estimated \$1.6 billion in AI investments being made by China's military. Much of it is also earmarked for initiatives to improve the decision-making of autonomous weapons systems.



Over the next ten to fifteen years, you'll see large portions of advanced countries' militaries become robotic.

Gen. Mark Milley, chairman, Joint Chiefs of Staff



The Artemis robot (Advanced Robotic Technology for Enhanced Mobility and Improved Stability), created by UCLA researchers.

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