

Chairman Schiff Opening Statement on Worldwide Threats

April 15, 2021

This is the first Worldwide Threats hearing this Committee has hosted since 2016. Though much of the IC's work, and therefore the Committee's work, must be conducted behind closed doors, an open Worldwide Threats hearing permits the Committee to get answers, and to help inform the American people about the myriad threats facing U.S. national security. As far as transparency goes, there simply is no substitute for an open hearing.

So, first, thank you for your testimony today. When intelligence assessments prove politically inconvenient, it is all the more important that you all speak truth to power. That is one of the reasons why the law now requires that, each year, an unclassified Worldwide Threats assessment must be submitted, and an open hearing must be held should Congress request one. This way the American people will learn about threats to U.S. security, no matter what the circumstances – including when the IC's views might not comport with a president's preferences.

The United States faces a rapidly evolving and complex landscape of threats. They come from hard targets, and soft threats. They range from nation-state actors to malicious cyber actors to domestic and international terrorists.

I'm looking forward to discussing your assessments in greater detail both in the open and CLOSED settings, but first I wanted to share a few of my thoughts on where we find ourselves:

We have known for years that a global pandemic was not only possible, but likely inevitable. But it is still staggering to think that in just one year, the pandemic has taken more than 560,000 American lives. That's more Americans than were killed in World War I and World War II – combined.

And even as we see the light at the end of the tunnel, this disaster will be with us for years to come, as we battle the virus and deal with the potential for destabilization around the world.

We need to learn from this experience. We need to be better prepared. We need to be able to anticipate and respond when another cross-border disease begins to spread. And our Intelligence Community plays a critical role in that. It must evolve as well and help us meet not only traditional threats, but also transnational and evolving threats like pandemics, like climate change, like resource scarcity, and much more.

These so-called "soft" threats are no longer soft. Not when they take so many lives. Not when climate change will remake our world. Not when pandemics can and do alter the very fabric of our society. A soft threat can kill you just as dead as a hard threat.

This shift isn't going to happen overnight, but we stand ready to work with you, in order to ensure that it does. Overseeing that evolution and ensuring that the Intelligence Community has all the resources it needs, and uses all of the information available to it – including open source – will be a key priority for this Committee.

And even as we confront these evolving transnational threats, we must maintain our core focus on nation state actors. China and Russia have different capabilities and intentions, but both seek to challenge and disrupt and supplant the liberal democratic order built by the United States.

We face challenges from these two nations across all domains, some of them very immediate — with Russia mobilizing its forces along the border with Ukraine, and China taking aggressive actions towards Taiwan. And we must confront persistent threats from nations like North Korea and Iran.

The executive order issued by President Biden this morning makes clear the United States will no longer sit on its hands in the face of Russian aggression. Election interference, attempted murder, the illegal invasion and occupation of Crimea, reported bounties, continuing cyber hacks. That list is not exhaustive. But the actions taken to respond to them, and, importantly, name and shame Russia and sanction those responsible, is absolutely critical.

In addition, sophisticated cyber operations targeting both our government and the private sector will continue to be a profound threat – like the recent SolarWinds and Microsoft compromises. As multifaceted as our policy must be in this area, I am increasingly convinced that bolstering the Nation’s cyber defenses must be a top priority.

Finally, I want to turn to one enduring challenge facing the United States and our allies. Autocracy is on the rise, and we are on the front lines in the battle for human rights, democracy, and freedoms around the globe. The Intelligence Community is also a critical part of that fight.

Still, threat to the liberal democratic order is not one we can meet primarily with our intelligence capabilities, or our military might. Above all, the United States must put human rights, democracy, and fundamental freedoms at the forefront, in our actions at home as well as abroad. I am heartened in this respect by the Administration’s declassification of an intelligence assessment concerning the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi. The report’s release demonstrates that we can and should be honest and transparent with both ourselves and the world when it comes to standing up for our fundamental values.

The single constant in the world is change. It has been nearly 20 years since the horrific attacks of September 11th, and yesterday President Biden announced his intention to withdraw our military forces from Afghanistan on or before that anniversary. We have seen the terrorist threat evolve such that we now face a dangerous rise in domestic violent extremism, which we saw firsthand on January 6. Through it all, we rely on the Intelligence Community to inform our efforts to stay ahead of these trends and anticipate change so that America is prepared to lead the world for the next century.

I thank you for your service, look forward to your testimony, and will now yield to the Ranking Member for any opening statement he might wish to make.