

The State Department’s Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation: Countering Biological Threats and the Evolving Biological Threat Landscape through a Nonproliferation Lens

Testimony by

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Good morning, Chairman Bera, Ranking Member Yoho, Chairman Langevin, Ranking Member Stefanik, and Representatives. Thank you for giving me the opportunity to describe how programs in my bureau, the Department of State’s Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation (ISN), work to address some of the most urgent and challenging biological threats to U.S. national security. I would also like to applaud Chairman Bera for his leadership regarding the importance of biosecurity and related health security issues, both of which are important to ISN.

As you heard from Assistant Secretary Ford last fall, ISN works to prevent rogue states, terrorists, and other malign actors from obtaining and using the worst possible weapons, including weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that include chemical, biological, radiological, and nuclear weapons and their means of delivery, against the United States and the American people.

In support of this national security mission, ISN wields the tools of diplomacy and foreign assistance to prevent the unchecked proliferation of WMD, delivery systems, and advanced conventional weapons capabilities, as well as to help roll back such proliferation where it has already occurred. In doing so, ISN advances key U.S. national security priorities – including those emphasized in the [2017 National Security Strategy](#), the [2018 National Biodefense Strategy](#), and the [2019 Global Health Security Strategy](#), among other State Department and U.S. government nonproliferation objectives.

This morning, in response to the requests from your committees, I am honored to provide an overview of how ISN leverages its leadership in international nonproliferation regimes and its capacity-building efforts to help protect the nation from current and emerging biological threats. Of course, my bureau is not alone within the State Department in dealing with a range of biological threats to the American people, and I am glad to be joined by my colleague from our Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES) who can speak

to our Department's broader global health security efforts. I am also pleased to appear before you alongside my colleagues from the Department of Defense who have been valuable and critical partners to my bureau for many years.

For today's hearing, I will describe the diplomatic efforts ISN is leading to urge renewed attention to combatting biological threats, describe some of the specific capacity-building work my bureau provides through foreign assistance programs, and highlight our close cooperation with U.S. interagency partners to achieve our share biological threat reduction goals through mutually reinforcing efforts. In the interest of time, I will limit my oral remarks but respectfully request that the full version of my prepared comments be entered into the record.

I. *Global Biological Threats Call for Global Solutions - Advancing Biological Nonproliferation Priorities through Multilateral Frameworks*

The COVID-19 pandemic is an undeniable tragedy and has brought to stark light just how much damage a single pathogen can cause, not just to the lives of people here at home and around the world, but also to the international security environment and the global economy. Although this pandemic is the most significant biological crisis we currently face, ISN has been working hard for nearly 20 years to address challenges posed by the full spectrum of biological threats, whether they are deliberately spread, accidentally released, or naturally occurring. We also believe that the COVID-19 pandemic has sparked an overdue re-evaluation of the dangers that infectious disease outbreaks pose to U.S. national security.

Biological threats – including emerging infectious disease threats – are among the most serious threats facing the United States and the international community. Countering such threats is an imperative element of the State Department's national security mission as biological threats can originate in one country and spread to others with potentially far-reaching international consequences. There are also important linkages between natural and man-made events. For example, we may not know at the outset which type of event is underway, and indeed for some cases we may never know. Naturally-occurring or accidental infectious disease outbreaks that arise by happenstance or in the absence of robust biosafety and biosecurity protocols can also create disquieting opportunities for malign actors. The recognition that a robust national defense against biological threats must integrate defense against both naturally occurring disease and biological weapons is embodied in the *2018 National Biodefense Strategy*, which is comprehensive in its whole-of-government approach. This *Strategy* integrates defense against biological threats targeting humans, animals, and plants, whether natural or man-made, and addresses the problem at the international and domestic levels.

While my bureau's focus within this broad biological threat landscape is on preventing the intentional use of biological agents as a weapon, much of our work has the added benefit of addressing infectious disease outbreaks caused naturally or accidentally. The State Department is also focused on preventing, detecting, and responding to naturally occurring outbreaks, and demonstrates leadership in this area within several international and multilateral initiatives, including the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA).

I would like to highlight the importance of GHSA for my own bureau's biosecurity work. This global initiative is one of few that offers the opportunity to bring together security and health sectors, which often work separately, under one shared vision of a world safe and secure from infectious disease threats. We are grateful for the leadership OES has long demonstrated in GHSA, and I am proud of ISN's contributions to advancing the GHSA's biosecurity goals since its inception through our capacity-building programs and through our close coordination with U.S. interagency partners such as the Department of Defense, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of Health and Human Services, and other partners in the global health security community.

Now I will address the key ways in which ISN has taken a leading diplomatic role to set the foundation to address emerging biological security threats. ISN works to help build, maintain, and strengthen the various multilateral frameworks and international institutions upon which the global nonproliferation regime depends. One example is our work within the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC). The BWC not only prohibits States Party from developing or possessing biological weapons, but also requires countries to implement the Convention by adopting national measures to prevent biological weapons from falling into the hands of non-state actors. The Convention is a key component of a broader international system that includes the Australia Group and UN Security Council Resolution 1540, and is designed to prevent the development, acquisition, and use of biological weapons and other WMD. These regimes, along with national measures that are coordinated internationally, such as sanctions and interdiction, are a critical foundation of our efforts to keep biological weapons threats in check.

But our work does not stop there. We use every international diplomatic tool at our disposal – including the G7-led Global Partnership Against the Spread of Weapons and Materials of Mass Destruction (GP) – to advance our biosecurity and other international security priorities. This year, under our government's Presidency of the G7 and GP, ISN is challenging GP partners to proactively tackle urgent and emerging biological threats. Our efforts are paying real dividends – the G7 Foreign Ministers dialogue has made COVID-19 and combatting biological threats the central theme of its action-oriented efforts. We do not rely on words alone to effect change, and through our leadership of the GP's Biosecurity Sub-Working Group, we have convinced our allies and international partners to launch a dedicated biosecurity initiative that will seek to leverage each member's capabilities and valuable lessons learned from years of biological threat reduction work to help solve enduring challenges. In this way, we are harnessing resurgent international enthusiasm to counter biological threats to focus attention and resources on sustainably strengthening the most serious biosecurity and biosafety weaknesses exposed by this pandemic in a coordinated and collaborative manner. After all, no one country can tackle these challenges on its own and global problems require global solutions.

II. *Partnerships to Achieve Biosecurity Objectives – Leveraging Foreign Assistance to Build Partner Capacity through Interagency and International Cooperation*

In addition to our diplomatic work through nonproliferation regimes and other multilateral frameworks, ISN has a long and rich history of programming against biological threats through capacity-building in partner countries. Since the mid-2000s, combatting biological threats around the world has been one of the main focus areas of our WMD threat reduction programs. We started primarily in Former Soviet Union states and over the years have expanded our work to engage partners in over 50 countries. For us biological threat reduction activities include enhancing physical security measures to protect dangerous pathogen collections from acquisition by nefarious actors, providing technical trainings on how to identify the pathogen causing an outbreak and what protective measures people should adopt to prevent them from contracting the disease, developing comprehensive standard operating procedures to make scientific institutions safe and secure for the people who work there and their communities, among other activities. In addition, we address the risk of cross-border transfers of dual-use materials and equipment that may contribute to development of biological weapons by helping partners build regulatory frameworks, institutional capabilities, and appropriate enforcement measures, including the capacity to detect, interdict, and prosecute illicit trade in sensitive biological agents and equipment.

In doing this work, we have built longstanding relationships with foreign partners in some of the most austere and challenging places in the world, and have trained thousands of partners in a whole-of-government and whole-of-society approach on biosecurity, biosafety, biosurveillance, and border security. These WMD threat reduction investments long preceded the pandemic yet are contributing in important ways to slowing its spread. Many of our partners have told us over the past several months how they are using the biosecurity, biosafety, and border security training and assistance we have provided to help mitigate COVID-19 in their countries.

These success stories were a reminder that although ISN's national security mission does not cover the entire array of infectious disease threats that fall under the purview of global health programs, we do have an important role to play in countering those emerging biological threats that pose a significant concern to the international security environment. Therefore, even as the coronavirus lockdowns were starting this spring, we did not wait for a top down directive to start programming against the growing pandemic threat. In a matter of weeks, we found ways to ensure that ongoing projects also incorporated COVID-19-related topics in our bureau's Cooperative Threat Reduction biosecurity, Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund, and export control and border security activities. We also did not allow massive disruptions to international travel or the rapid dispersal of our staff to a telework posture impede our efforts. Since mid-March, our bureau has continued to conduct remote capacity-building events across a range of nonproliferation issues with our partner countries.

Separate from the COVID-19-related global health and humanitarian efforts of the State Department and USAID, we in ISN have also exercised special authorities to

hire experts to staff our offices working on biological security issues, secured nearly \$1.86 million from our foreign assistance colleagues to address pandemic related nonproliferation objectives in Yemen, and accelerated ongoing efforts to reorganize our bureau to increase the level of attention and effort dedicated to biological threats. As we continue to strive to implement priorities with actions, we are presently in the process of programming an additional \$18 million toward controlling not just this pandemic, but preventing future catastrophic biological events via a Nonproliferation and Disarmament Fund. This proposal has already been sent to the Congress for concurrence. We are deeply appreciative of the many years of robust support the Congress has given to ISN's threat reduction programs, and we eagerly await your approval of this urgently needed biosecurity and border security work.

Of course, we in ISN and the State Department are not alone in tackling the pandemic or other biological threats in a foreign assistance capacity. Indeed, we constantly coordinate with counterparts in the U.S. government, both on our own and through National Security Council-chaired interagency processes, to implement our biological threat reduction work in an effective and complementary manner. We are thankful to our colleagues in the U.S. interagency and international community for their partnership and parallel efforts.

In particular, we are grateful for the decades-long partnership our bureau has enjoyed with the Department of Defense, especially its Cooperative Threat Reduction (DoD CTR) Program and other WMD threat reduction programs implemented by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency. At every step, from project concept to partner graduation, and at every level, from Under Secretaries to action officers, we communicate and collaborate with each other to ensure that U.S. taxpayer dollars are committed to countering the most urgent threats to U.S. national security and that we amplify and augment each other's efforts, rather than duplicate or complicate them.

We also strive to extend the reach of the DoD CTR Program's efforts through our diplomatic missions and through expansion of their relevant authorities, as OSD Policy deems necessary, to address emergent and urgent WMD threats. In this latter regard, I would like to thank Chairman Bera for his recognition of how streamlining the determination process by which the DoD CTR Program gains new geographic or functional authorities is key to ensuring they can tackle WMD threats wherever they arise.

III. *Looking to the Horizon – The Future of the Biological Threat Landscape*

In looking to the future, we are also working hard to keep pace with the rapidly evolving biological threat landscape. The nature of this threat landscape is changing in part due to significant advances in various biotechnologies. The full range of U.S. national security departments and agencies are carefully assessing and addressing these issues but we unfortunately cannot talk about the specifics in this open setting.

As for what we are doing at the unclassified level, ISN's key mission related to emerging technologies, such as genome editing technologies and synthetic biology, among others, is to mitigate their potential security-related perils while preserving their benefits. We focus on preventing the application of dual-use technologies to do harm, such as development of biological weapons, and are exploring ways in which we can leverage all of our available tools – from global norm-building to international capacity building – toward this end. For instance, the Biological Weapons Convention provides an important vehicle to press countries to assess and manage risks posed by advances in the life sciences – and to apply such advances for peaceful purposes, such as disease prevention. We also leverage other key multilateral fora and our international partnerships to promote updated laboratory biosafety and biosecurity practices and industry best practices in biosecurity. In addition, we are strengthening international preparedness for investigating and responding to biological terrorism and pushing for the modernization of a 20th century regime to grapple with 21st century biological threats.

Our bureau will continue to lead the charge in key biological nonproliferation systems and our international partnerships to help mitigate the proliferation and potential security risks of dual-use emerging biotechnologies.

IV. *Conclusion*

We are proud of all we are doing to combat infectious disease threats using our diplomatic and foreign assistance tools in support of U.S. national security and foreign policy priorities, Mr. Chairman.

As demonstrated by COVID-19 pandemic, the emergence of new biological threats – especially emerging infectious disease outbreaks – have the potential to make significant impact on national security and biological nonproliferation, and we appreciate the continued support of the Congress to provide us with the necessary resources to carry out our threat reduction mission.

As I have attempted to articulate today, we strongly believe that biological weapons nonproliferation and biosecurity are critical components of national security and the work of the State Department, but we also recognize that our work is far from over.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, Members of the Committees. I look forward to your questions.

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