

**Opening Statement**  
**The Honorable Ami Bera**  
**Chairman, Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation**

**Joint Hearing of the**  
**Subcommittee on Asia, the Pacific, and Nonproliferation**  
**Committee on Foreign Affairs**  
**and**  
**Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities**  
**Committee on Armed Services**

Strengthening Biological Security: Traditional Threats and Emerging Challenges  
Friday, October 2, 2020  
10:00 am EDT

I want to thank Ranking Member Yoho, House Armed Services Subcommittee on Intelligence and Emerging Threats and Capabilities Chairman Langevin and Ranking Member Stefanik, members of both subcommittees, our witnesses from the Departments of State and Defense, and members of the public for joining us at today's hearing.

Many years before the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the globe, I became concerned by our nation's ability to respond to biological security threats. That is why I was a member of the CSIS Commission on Strengthening America's Health Security and have championed global health security priorities throughout my time in Congress. Our system is currently structured to rely upon a mixed set of capabilities – some lying at the Department of State, some at the Department of Defense, others spread across other agencies. I have found them to be woefully under-resourced and under-staffed considering the current and emerging risks our nation faces, and have consistently tried to support increases in the budget for these activities. I am especially grateful that Chairman Langevin was willing to bring together at least two pieces of the puzzle here today so we can consolidate our stove-piped architecture for a few hours to get a view of the bulk of our international security programs and activities.

Many of the risks we will discuss today are frightening. A year ago we may have assumed it was alright to scrimp on personnel and activities that were low risk, things we assume will never happen in our lifetimes. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the immense consequences that can result from a low-probability, high-impact biological event. It has impacted our daily lives, our economy, and our traditional security assumptions. COVID-19 is an example of the consequences that could ensue if a biological weapon was used. I am now convinced more than ever that our nation needs a proactive biological defense strategy that puts the United States at the forefront of international leadership to address the range of biological threats, including naturally occurring incidents, medical or research center accidents, or deliberate bioweapon attacks.

As Chairman for the Foreign Affairs Subcommittee with jurisdiction over nonproliferation, I am particularly concerned with two main issues. First, how are we working with our international

partners outside U.S. borders to mitigate these threats, programmatically and diplomatically. Second, is the United States well-resourced and well-positioned to be considering not just traditional natural, accidental, and deliberate biological threats, but also the new emerging threats and challenges that will accompany the continuing rapid advancements in the bio-technology field.

The nonproliferation field suffers from the same problem that faces most high-risk, low-probability events: success means nothing bad has happened. In the absence of bad events, it is easy for some to think that there is no point in spending a lot of resources on these problems. But allowing attention to fade away on what is, essentially, an evergreen problem is the wrong course of action.

COVID-19 has our nation's full attention, which has created a spillover opportunity to secure our nation from *all* forms of biological threats. This cannot be done without international cooperation. In 2014 the U.S. provided assistance to partner countries to address Ebola, which quickly helped to stop the outbreak from becoming far worse than it could have been. We realized that global health security is in our national security interest. We should be applying the same principles of international cooperation today.

Our Subcommittee continues to prioritize the work we do with our international partners in the biosecurity, threat reduction, and nonproliferation space. If nothing else, this pandemic has taught us that we have much work to do internationally to protect Americans from future biological events in all of its forms.

I have spent the past year giving special attention to this matter as a Member of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

In May, I sent a letter to Speaker Nancy Pelosi asking her to prioritize the international bio-engagement programs at the Departments of State and Defense as we continue to combat COVID-19. In March, before the full gravity of the pandemic had even set in, I highlighted the need for increased biosecurity programmatic and staffing resources for the State Department's International Security and Nonproliferation Bureau in a letter I sent to Appropriations Committee Chairwoman Nita Lowey as one of my priority funding requests.

Over these past several months, I have held several meetings with senior administration officials to discuss biosecurity matters. I have met the then Acting-head of the State Department's Nonproliferation Bureau multiple times to discuss their Biosecurity Engagement Program and talk about the work done by their Biological Policy Planning staff, before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have spoken with our Geneva-based Ambassador to the Biological Weapons Convention about the diplomatic work ahead of next year's anticipated BWC Review Conference. I had the pleasure of meeting one of our witnesses, DTRA Director Vayl Oxford, to discuss the Department of Defense's work with partner countries with the Biological Threat Reduction Program. A few months prior to this hearing, my subcommittee held a biosecurity briefing for Members of the Subcommittee with Dr. Beth Cameron, Vice President for Biological Policy and Programs at the Nuclear Threat Initiative and former NSC Senior Director for Global Health Security and Biodefense and Dr. Alexander Titus, Chief Strategy Officer, Advanced Regenerative Manufacturing Institute (ARMI) and former Assistant Director for Biotechnology at the Department of Defense.

These conversations have ultimately made me more concerned about our biosecurity posture, far beyond our COVID-19 response.

For decades the United States has played a leading role in working with international partners to strengthen their biosecurity standards through our cooperative threat reduction programs, both at the Department of Defense and the Department of State. But now, new challenges compel us to think outside of the box and beyond our previous programmatic work to keep Americans safer. Today, advancements in the field of biotech are producing technologies such as gene editing and DNA synthesis which are capable of causing great good -- or great harm.

Imagine a virus such as COVID-19. With advanced biotech, we can either quickly race to find a cure and develop a vaccine in a shortened time frame, or a bad actor could take the virus and edit it to become even more fatal or disruptive. The beneficial opportunities which will accompany many of these advancements should be encouraged, but need to be balanced against the risks of potential misuse. As a doctor, I firmly believe that guidelines for ethical and responsible use of biotech should be developed. Our government must work with non-governmental entities, such as academic research centers, laboratories, and private industry to develop these guidelines before chaotic development leads to dangerous technologies and methods falling into the wrong hands. This especially applies as such technology is democratized and accessible not only to Americans, but to actors around the entire globe.

I'm also concerned about the state of our international institutions that the United States has played a strong role in for so long that seem to be falling apart. To handle biological events and threats from a nonproliferation perspective, the United States has traditionally participated in multilateral meetings at the Biological Weapons Convention. Whereas international organizations like the International Atomic Energy Agency or the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons have hundreds of staff, the entire BWC's implementing organization is only supported through a three-person implementation unit. Do we really think that only three people can ensure the world is adhering to the global norm and international law against biological weapons? Beyond that, there appear to be issues with the decision making process at the BWC, a consensus-based organization. The BWC fills an important space in the international sphere that must used to develop stronger norms and guidelines for responsible use of dual-use capabilities, and we need to ensure the U.S. is giving it the attention it deserves.

Given the difficulties at the BWC, for better or for worse, many nations had turned to the World Health Organization for biodefense. As we all know, the Trump administration has withdrawn the United States from the WHO. However, even if the United States was still a part of the WHO, and even if the BWC's Implementation Support Unit had the staff it needed, the question still remains whether these two organizations are enough to address the emerging biotechnology and guide its international standard for ethical and responsible use—or whether such a duty belongs to a different entity.

Finally, I am worried that we're not doing enough to think about how our response to COVID-19, and our shoring up of our public health systems and capabilities abroad, is also being utilized to counter non-naturally occurring threats. This is particularly what I look forward to learning about

today from our witnesses. For example, how are we working with our international partners to establish shared tactics, tools, or methodologies to keep ahead of any biological incident? How are we working around the world to set up either early warning systems or bio-surveillance or detection capabilities? What can we discuss in an open setting to reassure Americans that as we are pouring in their tax dollars into defeating COVID-19, that we are also looking for the opportunities that we can use right now, right here to walk the public health walk and talk the national security talk?

Moving forward, we need to ensure that not only our current work through cooperative threat reduction is continuing with the investment it needs, but we are also looking ahead to establishing stronger international standards for laboratories, attribution, and a set of guidelines for the responsible and ethical use of emerging bio-technologies such as gene-editing and synthetic biology. The United States needs to continue to lead on the international stage because only the United States and our allies will ensure that any such development is done transparently and democratically, which is what we need for our own security. With that, I look forward to hearing the testimony of our witnesses. Thank you for your time.