



Remarks as prepared for delivery by
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Director of National Intelligence

Annual Threat Assessment
Opening Statement
April 14, 2021

Chairman Warner, Vice Chairman Rubio, and Members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to offer the Intelligence Community's 2021 assessment of worldwide threats to U.S. national security. On behalf of the entire Intelligence Community, I want to express how much we appreciate your support and your partnership.

I would also like to thank the men and women of the Intelligence Community. Their efforts rarely receive public accolades because of the nature of their work but they help to keep us safe, often at personal sacrifice. We remain committed to providing them with the resources our mission requires and the support we owe them. It is my honor to serve alongside these dedicated officers, including the extraordinary leaders seated next to me, and to represent their work to you.

Our goal today is to convey to you and the public we serve and protect, the threat environment as we perceive it and to do our best to answer questions about the challenges we face. I will only highlight a few points and provide some context in my opening statement -- for a more detailed threat picture, I refer you to the Annual Threat Assessment we issued yesterday, which is a reflection of the collective insights of the Intelligence Community.

Broadly speaking, the Intelligence Community is focused on traditional categories of issues we have been discussing for years: adversaries and competitors, critical transnational threats, and conflicts and instability. I will summarize our views on these but first I want to take note of the shifting landscape we see today and its implications

for our work. The trends underlying and intersecting these issues are increasing the pace, complexity, and impact of these threats in ways that require us to evolve.

During the past year, the COVID-19 Pandemic demonstrated the inherent risks of high levels of interdependence and in coming years, as reflected in our recently issued Global Trends Report, we assess that the world will face more intense and cascading global challenges ranging from disease to climate change, to disruptions from new technologies and financial crises. As we note in that report “[t]hese challenges will repeatedly test the resilience and adaptability of communities, states, and the international system, often exceeding the capacity of existing systems and models. This looming disequilibrium between existing and future challenges and the ability of institutions and systems to respond is likely to grow and produce greater contestation at every level.”

For the Intelligence community, this insight compels us to broaden our definition of national security, develop and integrate new and emerging expertise into our work, deepen and strengthen our partnerships, and learn to focus on the long-term strategic threats while simultaneously addressing urgent crises. In short, at no point has it been more important to invest in our norms and institutions, our workforce, and the integration of our work. Doing so, provides us with the opportunity to meet the challenges we face, to pull together as a society, and to promote resilience and innovation.

And as we evolve, you will see our efforts to more effectively integrate longer-term destabilizing trends into our daily work, thereby promoting strategic foresight and a deeper understanding of the threats we face, which we hope will help the policy community effectively prioritize their work to address the issues we seek to present.

Against this backdrop, the Annual Threat Assessment describes an array of threats we are facing in the coming year, beginning with those emanating from key state actors. Given that China is an unparalleled priority for the Intelligence Community, I will start with highlighting certain aspects of the threat from Beijing.

China increasingly is a near-peer competitor challenging the United States in multiple arenas, while pushing to revise global norms in ways that favor the authoritarian

Chinese system. China is employing a comprehensive approach to demonstrate its growing strength and compel regional neighbors to acquiesce to Beijing's preferences, including its claims over disputed territory and assertions of sovereignty over Taiwan. It also has substantial cyber capabilities that if deployed, at a minimum, can cause localized, temporary disruptions to critical infrastructure inside the United States. While China poses an increasingly formidable challenge to the U.S. role in global affairs, it is worth noting that its economic, environmental and demographic vulnerabilities all threaten to complicate its ability to manage the transition to the dominant role it aspires to in the decades ahead.

Moscow will continue to employ a variety of tactics to undermine U.S. influence and erode Western alliances. While Russia does not want a conflict with the United States, Russian officials have long believed that Washington is seeking to weaken Russia and Moscow will use a range of tools to pursue its objectives, including mercenary operations, assassinations, and arms sales. It will also employ, as we have reported, new weapons and cyber capabilities to threaten the United States and its allies, and seeks to use malign influence campaigns, including in the context of U.S. elections, to undermine our global standing, sow discord, and influence U.S. decision-making. Russia is becoming increasingly adept at leveraging its technological prowess to develop asymmetric options in both the military and cyber spheres in order to give itself the ability to push back and force the United States to accommodate Russia's interests.

Turning to Iran, Tehran is seeking to project power in neighboring states, deflect international pressure, and minimize threats to regime stability. Iraq will be a key battleground for Iranian influence in the coming year, but Tehran will also continue to pursue a permanent military presence in Syria, destabilize Yemen, and threaten Israel. For its part, North Korea may take aggressive and potentially destabilizing actions to reshape its security environment and will seek to drive wedges between the United States and its allies. These efforts could include the resumption of nuclear weapons and intercontinental ballistic missile testing.

When it comes to transnational threats, the assessment focuses on key issues that intersect with the state-actor threats I just outlined, starting with COVID-19.

The effects of the current pandemic will obviously continue to strain governments and societies over the coming year, fueling humanitarian and economic crises, political unrest, and geopolitical competition as countries, such as China and Russia, seek advantage through “vaccine diplomacy” to build influence and in some cases demand accessions from other governments. Countries with high debts or that depend on oil exports, tourism, or remittances face particularly challenging recoveries, while others will turn inward or be distracted by other challenges. The critical impact of the pandemic has also served to highlight the importance of public health to national security.

Ecological degradation and a changing climate will continue to fuel disease outbreaks, threaten food and water security, and exacerbate political instability and humanitarian crises. Although much of the effect of a changing climate on U.S. security will play out indirectly in a broader political and economic context, warmer weather can generate direct, immediate impacts—for example, through more intense, frequent, and variable extreme weather events, in addition to driving conflicts over scarce natural resources. The changing climate, conflict, and economic deprivation will drive vulnerable populations from their homes, heightening humanitarian needs and increasing the risk of political upheaval.

The scourge of illicit drugs and transnational organized crime will continue to take its toll on American lives, prosperity, and safety. Major narcotics trafficking groups and other transnational criminal organizations will continue to drive threat streams, while also being used by adversaries, employing cyber tools to steal from U.S. and foreign businesses and use complex financial schemes to launder illicit proceeds, undermining confidence in financial institutions.

Emerging and disruptive technologies, as well as the proliferation and permeation of technology in all aspects of our lives, pose unique challenges. Cyber capabilities, to illustrate, are demonstrably intertwined with threats from our infrastructure and to foreign malign influence threats against our democracy. And we need, as you all have stressed to us, to focus on the competition in critical technical areas such as high

performance computing, microelectronics, biotechnology, artificial intelligence, quantum computing, fiber optics, and metamaterials.

With regard to global terrorism, ISIS and al-Qa'ida remain the most pressing threats to US interests overseas. These groups seek to conduct attacks inside the United States, but sustained CT pressure has broadly degraded their capabilities. Domestically, lone actors and small cells with a broad range of ideological motivations pose a greater immediate threat. We see this threat manifest itself in individuals who are inspired by al-Qa'ida and ISIS, often called Homegrown Violent Extremism and those who commit terrorist acts for ideological goals stemming from other influences, such as racial bias and antigovernment sentiment, which we refer to as Domestic Violent Extremism or DVE. DVE is an increasingly complex threat that is growing in the United States. These extremists often see themselves as part of a broader global movement and in fact, a number of other countries are experiencing a rise in DVE. For example, Australia, Germany, Norway, and the United Kingdom consider white racially or ethnically motivated violent extremists, including Neo-Nazi groups, to be the fastest growing terrorist threat they face.

And of course, regional conflicts continue to fuel humanitarian crises, undermine stability and threaten U.S. persons and interests. The fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria has a direct implication for U.S. forces while tensions between nuclear-armed India and Pakistan remain a concern for the world. The iterative violence between Israel and Iran, the activity of foreign powers in Libya, and conflicts in other areas, including Africa and the Middle East, have the potential to escalate or spread. Asia has periodic upheavals such as the Burmese military's seizure of power in February; Latin America has contested elections and violent popular protests are likely to continue to produce volatility; while Africa will continue to see ongoing marginalization of some communities, ethnic conflict, and contentious elections.

In closing, we face a broad array of longstanding and emerging threats, whose intersection is raising the potential for cascading crises. Our increasingly interconnected and mobile world offers enormous opportunities. At the same time, it multiplies our challenges, calling us to even greater vigilance as we seek to protect our vital national

interests, promote resilience, and invest in our institutions and our people, who will be the only and best answer to addressing these challenges. We have to take care of our people and so I would be remiss not to note, before ending, a final threat we are tracking – anomalous health incidents that have affected a number of our personnel.

The Intelligence Community is taking these incidents very seriously, and is committed to investigating the source of these incidents, preventing them from continuing, and caring for those affected. We appreciate the support that many of you have shown for our personnel on this issue, as with everything else we work on around the globe.

We look forward to answering your questions about these and other worldwide threats.