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INSIGHT

Biological Security Engagement in Ukraine: U.S. Cooperation and Threat Reduction Programs

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During its invasion of Ukraine, the Russian government has accused Ukraine of possessing a clandestine biological weapons program with support from the United States. To the contrary, the United States has cooperated with Ukraine on biological security programs ranging from laboratory security to disease surveillance and pandemic response, as documented by the U.S. embassy website, annual budget requests, and congressional oversight hearings. These programs are rooted in the U.S. Cooperative Threat Reduction Program (CTR). The United States and Ukraine are both members of the Biological Weapons Convention (BWC), which prohibits such weapons, and the United States has stated that both are in full compliance with their obligations. The State Department assesses that the Russian government "maintains an offensive biological weapons program" in violation of the BWC.

Congress has raised questions about this issue in recent hearings. U.S. Director of National Intelligence (DNI) Avril Haines testified on March 10 that "we do not assess that Ukraine is pursuing either biological weapons or nuclear weapons." State Department Spokesman Ned Price said on March 9, "Russia is inventing false pretexts in an attempt to justify its own horrific actions in Ukraine." The allegation has led to concern that Russia may be planning a "false flag" operation in which it plants evidence or uses a biological weapon against Ukraine but blames another party.

In addition, combat operations may put sensitive biological laboratories at risk. A Department of Defense (DOD) press release says, "There are five biological research laboratories in Kyiv. Their work focuses on diagnostics, therapeutics, treatments, prevention and vaccines, not on military use as the Russians and Chinese accuse." U.S. officials and outside experts have expressed concerns that Ukraine's laboratories holding pathogen collections may come under attack or Russian military control. The World Health Organization reportedly urged Ukrainian authorities to destroy research samples of disease pathogens to avoid accidental release should the facilities be damaged in the war. An emergency meeting of the UN Security Council, requested by Russia, discussed the issue on March 11. The United Nations High Representative for Disarmament Affairs Izumi Nakamitsu said that "certain public health facilities are in areas impacted by armed conflict putting the safety of those facilities at risk," and that the United Nations is "not aware" of any biological weapons program in Ukraine. U.S. Ambassador to the United

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Nations Linda Thomas-Greenfield told the Council: "Ukraine does not have a biological weapons program, and there are no Ukrainian biological weapons laboratories supported by the United States." She also said, "Ukraine owns and operates its own public health laboratory infrastructure. These facilities make it possible to detect and diagnose diseases like COVID-19, which benefit us all. The United States has assisted Ukraine to do this safely and securely."

In the past, the Russian and Chinese governments have repeatedly alleged that U.S. ongoing biological security cooperation programs in Ukraine, Georgia, and Kazakhstan were military in nature. Several U.S. federal agencies, such as the State Department and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), cooperate with Ukraine to meet international biosafety and global health security standards. The Department of Defense Cooperation Threat Reduction (CTR) program also works with partner countries to destroy or secure high-priority biological pathogens ("Select Agents") at their source and to develop the partner's capacity to detect, diagnose, and report a disease outbreak. The Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) strongly denies any weapons-related aspects. Congress oversees implementation of these programs.

CTR's biological engagement began as a program focused on dismantling the vast biological weapons complex inherited from the Soviet Union. Ukraine and other non-Russian states of the former Soviet Union have been willing partners in dismantling the Soviet biological weapons legacy and securing pathogen collections and laboratories. Facilities in these countries were abandoned by the Russian military when the republics became independent states, and in many cases local governments were not aware of their existence or the dangers they housed. Over time, the United States learned of dangerous pathogen collections dispersed throughout the region. A decade after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, these facilities lacked security and safety measures, had lost expert staff due to economic conditions, and many were in a state of disrepair. The United States, accordingly, accelerated its assistance to these facilities starting in the late 1990s.

Congress first added funds to the DOD's CTR budget for biological threat reduction (BTR) in the late 1990s. The DOD CTR FY2022 Budget Estimate says the BTR "program seeks to facilitate detection and reporting of diseases caused by especially dangerous pathogens (EDPs), including zoonotic diseases, which could affect the armed forces of the United States or its allies and partners." DOD assistance has focused on improving biosafety and security (BS&S) at laboratories housing pathogen collections, including equipment upgrades and training, as well as disease detection, diagnosis, and reporting enhancements (BSV). The BTR program has built secure Central Reference Laboratories (CRL) for pathogen collections in Azerbaijan, Ukraine, and Kazakhstan, and completed upgrades at 39 "Secured Labs" in Armenia, Georgia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. In addition, the program has provided Ukraine with Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) technical and material assistance, including biosafety equipment, diagnostic supplies, and subject matter expertise.

In light of Russia's apparent persistent dissemination of disinformation regarding biological security cooperation with Ukraine, Congress may examine how the federal government is countering these claims, to include examining how effective the U.S. government has been in presenting information of its own. Congress may also conduct oversight regarding the safety and security of pathogen collections and biological research laboratories during the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine. Additional potential oversight topics include whether personnel at those facilities are able to maintain operations and how to leverage CTR funds in the context of security assistance to Ukraine.

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