

Health Security Roundtable Washington, DC

May 9, 2017

Bioterrorism

Summary

The 2014 West African Ebola outbreak sharply increased awareness among world leaders that localized infectious disease outbreaks in relatively remote areas of the world can not only threaten the stability of states in the immediate vicinity but also pose risks to the entire global community. In recognition of this reality, the MSC, in partnership with Chatham House, Merck, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, has launched a series of events on Health Security to provide a platform for senior leaders to deepen their understanding of what is at stake and what critical policy choices lie in front of them. For our most recent roundtable in Washington, DC, MSC partnered with the Global Health Policy Center at the Center for Strategic & International Studies (CSIS).

Moderated by J. Stephen Morrison, CSIS Senior Vice President, the Health Security Roundtable in Washington, D.C. assembled senior decision-makers from government, the military, politics, industry and non-governmental organizations. Rob Nabors, Director of Policy and Government Affairs at the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Wendy Sherman, former US Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs, and Tim Ziemer, Senior Director for Health Security and Biodefense at the White House, offered prepared opening remarks. Parliamentary State Secretary in the Ministry of Defense, Ralf Brauksiepe represented the German Government.

In line with Bill Gates' statement on the threat of biological weapons and epidemics at this year's Munich Security Conference, the threat of a manmade or naturally occurring infectious disease continues to draw considerable policy debate. Some meeting participants emphasized that recent progress in genetic engineering has not only brought medical and scientific advancements but has also increased the risk of bioterrorism as pathogens become easier to modify. Surveilling, understanding and mitigating these potential threats remain formidable future challenges. At present we are running behind these momentous shifts in science and technology.

Participants noted that the world remains ill-equipped to deal with major outbreaks, and that strengthening national health systems – especially in countries with weak or no governance structures—is essential to any shared global preparedness. There is a broad consensus of the need to carry forward promising initiatives which bolster global resilience against infectious disease threats and strengthen emergency response capacities – most significantly, the Global Health Security Agenda (GHSA) and the recently launched Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI). The success of each will require ample additional resources and continued high-level political leadership. Sustained diplomacy will also be key to strengthening the World Health Organization (WHO) and mobilizing behind the GHSA vision partner countries, industry and NGOs.

The Trump administration's commitment to health security was a special point of discussion. Participants welcomed remarks that health security remains a priority in the new administration and that health security initiatives launched by the Obama administration, such as the GHSA, will be continued. Participants also questioned if the GHSA could be effectively advanced if there is a sharp reduction in US foreign assistance, as currently proposed in the Trump administration Fiscal Year 2018 budget.

Participants argued that one important, immediate opportunity is to build into existing routine US-EU strategic consultations an ongoing health security dialogue that identifies and advances concrete US-EU collaborations in building preparedness capacity, while getting ahead of new technologies by harmonizing regulatory, surveillance and R&D approaches.