

**United States House of Representatives**  
**Committee on Armed Services**

***The Department of Defense's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic***

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Good afternoon, Chairwoman Speier, Ranking Member Kelly, and Members of the Subcommittee.

Thank you for allowing me the opportunity to offer an outside perspective on the important role of the US Department of Defense (DoD) in the global response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

I am an Associate Professor in the Departments of Environmental Health and Engineering and Epidemiology at Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health and a Senior Scholar at the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security.

At the Center, I direct the Outbreak Observatory, which conducts operational research to improve outbreak response, and I am Center-lead for the Global Health Security Index, which measures the health security capacities of 195 countries. My testimony is also influenced by my previous experiences as a public health practitioner. *The opinions expressed herein are my own and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Johns Hopkins University.*

In my limited time, I will focus on two areas where I think DoD is making particularly important contributions to the response to COVID-19.

The first pertains to DoD's OCONUS investments and partnerships and the second to conducting essential research that helps us better understand SARS-COV-2 virus (how it's transmitted and how we may best control its spread to better protect US health and security).

*So, first, DoD's role in:*

**1) Building countries' core capacities to detect and respond to biological threats:**

The DoD has for many decades played an important role in building countries' core capacities to detect and respond to biological threats.

The Department's OCONUS work to build laboratory capacity and strengthen the scientific capacity of in-country partners has led to important discoveries about emerging biological threats, as well as enhanced the readiness of countries to better respond and save lives.

COVID-19 has demonstrated the impact of these partnerships and investments, and how they directly benefit the United States as well as the rest of the world.

In the winter, early epidemiological investigations conducted in and shared by US partner countries have improved our understanding of the virus and its transmission.

Thailand, where the DoD has maintained long-term scientific collaborations and a research presence, identified a COVID-19 case in a traveler from Wuhan who reported not having exposure to the initially implicated seafood market. This epidemiological finding first raised the possibility of infection among those without a connection to the Huanan market.

DoD-supported global health security engagement in Vietnam have also supported the development of essential capacities to respond to COVID-19.

The finding of a case of COVID-19 in a 27-year old man who had not visited China, but had been caring for his sick father who had recently travelled from Wuhan provided the first known evidence that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was capable of human-to-human transmission.

It is my strong belief that global health security partnerships like the kind DoD has engaged in Vietnam and Thailand better equips partner countries to conduct these sorts of epidemiological investigations and that the United States learns and benefit from the insights they provide.

*Second, DoD's important contributions in:*

**2) Conducting epidemiological research to help improve understanding of COVID-19 transmission and prospects for control:**

The DoD is well-poised to help improve global understanding of the epidemiology of COVID-19 and other emerging biological threats. DoD is engaged in on-going research, some of which, I hear is about to be published in top medical journals, which will lead to the discovery of more effective treatments and disease control measures, which will help protect the health of US personnel and the broader US population.

The Department has been conducting important epidemiological research regarding viral transmission among military personnel. Investigations, such as those among recruits and instructors at Parris Island, are helping to characterize when and how transmission of the virus occurs; to define strategies for testing individuals; and to inform control measures.

DoD-supported research has led to the development of the first, scalable saliva-based test for the SARS-COV-2 virus. Having a test that can utilize an easy-to-obtain specimen like saliva will have important benefits for protecting our forces and the larger United States will benefit as well. Because DoD supported the development of *scalable commercial* test, it will be an important tool for use in all sorts of American settings, including possibly businesses and schools, which will help to protect American public health and help to reopen the economy.

DoD-funded research is also helping to identify how the virus is transmitted in critical environments, such as airplanes. This research will help better protect DoD personnel during air transport and is already being looked at by the commercial air industry to improve the protection of civilian travelers and flight crews.

## **Conclusion**

I am very much looking forward to the publication of the DoD's important research and have no doubts that it will greatly enhance our understanding of how best to respond to COVID-19. DoD is possibly unmatched to perform this kind of life-saving research, which clearly provide dual benefits, both for the protection of troops' health and the protection of the health of civilians in non-DoD settings. In my view, the examples I shared highlight the important contributions that DoD provides in advancing global health security and underscore why I hope DoD continues to play active roles in these efforts.