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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
HOMELAND SECURITY AND GOVERNMENTAL AFFAIRS
WASHINGTON, DC 20510-6250

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November 19, 2020

The Honorable Donald J. Trump
President of the United States
The White House
1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20500

Mr. President,

On May 12, 2020, I sent you a letter highlighting concerns around reported Chinese government sponsored attacks against the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), hospitals, research laboratories, and pharmaceutical companies with the goal of stealing COVID-19 treatment and vaccine research. In that letter, I urged you to take action to stop these attacks.

On July 16, 2020, the United Kingdom, Canada, and the U.S., released an advisory stating that the Russian Government has also been targeting our health care system, again in search of COVID-19 vaccine development and testing data. On November 13, Microsoft published an alert warning of hacking groups connected to the Russian and North Korean governments that targeted COVID-19 vaccine and treatment researchers in Canada, France, India, South Korea, and the United States. According to the alert, some of their attacks were successful.

I am angered by these government sponsored cyber-attacks and your lack of action to deter them over the past months. And now you've decided to fire the Director of the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA), the Deputy Director of CISA, and the CISA Assistant Director for Cybersecurity. CISA, with the Department of Defense, is responsible for the cybersecurity of your own Operation Warp Speed to develop a COVID-19 vaccine and you've removed its top three cybersecurity leaders. While I have full confidence in the dedicated workforce at CISA to continue to execute their mission despite your actions, the removal of these individuals invites attacks from our adversaries based on a perception of instability, rather than prevent them.

This is not about keeping COVID-19 vaccine research for Americans alone, it is about ensuring that the institutions performing this research are not experiencing intrusions onto their systems that could disrupt or destroy this research. I again urge you to take necessary actions to mitigate this threat. These hackers put the lives of Americans at risk.

In my previous letter, I called on you to take action to deter adversary activity, and while I applaud the joint advisory issued over the summer and recent Department of Justice indictments, it is clear these attacks have continued and that your actions thus far are insufficient to deter our adversaries. Not only have you not taken adequate action to stop Chinese government aggression, but your inaction has invited additional attackers. This is completely unacceptable.

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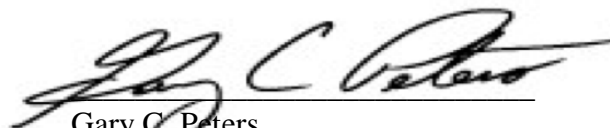
As the Ranking Member of the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee, I have called for improving the security of state, local, and private sector institutions that are researching COVID-19. I have made clear that in this time of crisis, the federal government should prioritize cybersecurity support to safeguard our health care sector.

I urge you, again, to send a strong message to any foreign government attempting to hack into our medical institutions that this behavior is unacceptable. The Administration should use the tools at its disposal, including the threat of sanctions, to deter future attacks against research institutions. In the event that any foreign government directly threatens the lives of Americans through attacks on medical facilities, other Department of Defense capabilities should be considered to make it clear that there will be consequences for these actions.

Given the continuation of attacks throughout the year, and your lack of response to my previous letter, I reiterate my request for you to take all necessary measures to protect medical institutions working to save lives by developing treatments and a vaccine for COVID-19. These measures should include:

1. Directing CISA and CYBERCOM to continue to prioritize cybersecurity support to hospitals and medical research institutions, including providing risk and vulnerability assessments and sharing cyber threat intelligence information with those organizations.
2. Utilizing all levers of national power – diplomatic, military, economic, and law enforcement – to deter adversary governments from any attacks against U.S. health care system and make clear that any attack on our medical systems will be treated as a significant threat to our country.
3. Increasing cybersecurity funding as part of future COVID-19 funding requests to Congress for hospitals, medical and research institutions.
4. Directing Secretary Azar to prioritize HHS information technology appropriations towards improvements in cybersecurity, and encouraging the Secretary to work with GAO and the HHS Inspector General to improve its cybersecurity posture.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Gary C. Peters", written over a horizontal line.

Gary C. Peters
Ranking Member