I thank you, Mr. President, and I warmly congratulate you on your election.

For four decades, the Biological Weapons Convention has served as the primary mechanism for addressing the risk of weaponized pathogens. It has solidified the global norm against the use of disease as a weapon. No nation on Earth claims that biological weapons are legitimate or admits pursuing them, and we are all safer because of them.

Our march towards universalization of the Treaty continues. We welcome 12 new States Parties since the last Review Conference. With each accession, our world becomes safer. Still, major challenges remain.

Biological weapons have been used in the past, and there is clear and troubling evidence that terrorist groups, individuals, and states continue to pursue them. Advances in the life sciences and the increasing availability of materials, equipment, and knowledge, have placed biological weapons within reach of more actors than ever before.

This is why we must all make a concerted, sustained effort to support, and fund, and use the impressive array of tools we have developed to counter the threat posed by state and non-state actors.

Together, we can take decisive action to strengthen the Convention’s implementation, to enhance confidence in compliance, to develop capacity to respond to biological weapons use by state and non-state actors, and to enhance international cooperation.
I emphasize first that there is no substitute for effective national implementation, and many States Parties still have much work to do. One in four States Parties has not prohibited development or production of biological weapons in their domestic law; one in three has no prohibition on possession of biological weapons – or transfer of such weapons to others. And, despite the requirements of UN Security Council Resolution 1540 and the Terrorist Bombing Convention, one in eight States Parties has no legislation which criminalizes the use of biological weapons.

The United States has offered ideas to address this implementation deficit in our own Working Papers and in our joint proposal with India concerning Article III.

I stress second that we must acknowledge that some concerns exist about some States Parties’ compliance with the Biological Weapons Convention.

In a national working paper, we have proposed ways to strengthen confidence, to improve the confidence-building measures and create a wider set of options for addressing inevitable questions about the operation of the Convention.

And third, while States Parties to the BWC are steadfast in their determination to prevent any use, we still must prepare for this horrific possibility.

One need only look to the OPCW-UN Joint Investigative Mechanism (JIM) Report on the use of chemical weapons by the Asad regime and ISIL to see that some states and non-state actors are still capable of such despicable acts.

This Conference should state unambiguously that use of biological weapons under any circumstance is unacceptable, that allegations of such use should be investigated promptly, and that those responsible for the use of such weapons will be held accountable.

States Parties should also take steps to enhance national and international capabilities to detect, investigate, and respond to the use of such weapons rapidly and effectively. This includes developing practical approaches to coordinate international assistance and response, recognizing it will not always be clear
whether an outbreak is deliberate or natural.

In particular, we call upon all States Parties to affirm their willingness to provide access to an investigation team, consistent with safety and domestic legal constraints.

The revolutionary advances in the life sciences hold tremendous promise for tackling the most serious health challenges facing humanity. That promise drives the United States in its efforts to facilitate the fullest possible exchange of equipment, materials, and information for the use of biological agents and toxins for peaceful purposes.

Accordingly, we are proud to be a major provider of assistance for countries to implement the International Health Regulations, and we are proud to work with organizations and nations around the world to develop measurable targets so that countries can prevent, detect, and rapidly respond to biological threats. Over the last year, we have added $1 billion in new assistance to this effort.

As we seek to increase collaboration in life sciences, we must all take the steps to ensure that the tools and materials produced in these fields are used only for peaceful purposes.

The rapid pace of innovation in the life sciences and the evolving threat environment will require that the States Parties to the BWC take action more often than once every five years. We need to collaborate and anticipate more often and more purposefully.

We know there will be many proposals over the coming weeks on which we will find broad agreement. That’s not the problem. The challenge ahead of us is to make progress in areas in which we disagree. To accomplish this, we need a new, more vigorous approach to our work between Review Conferences.

We must find a way past our differing, and sometimes conflicting, agendas, in order to be able to assure our citizens that we are taking the necessary and pragmatic steps to make the Convention stronger and more effective.
If we fail to come to consensus this month, it will not damage this Convention. It will not damage the international nonproliferation regime. This Convention – and compliance with its requirements – will remain strong. But we can do more. We can agree that we should not settle for an unproductive status quo. And we can take practical, meaningful steps to improve our cooperation.

The United States delegation will work constructively toward that goal.

Thank you, Mr. President.