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In a dangerous world, we need to organize our resources

If we take steps now to strengthen our supply chains, we will be in much better shape for our next pandemic, write U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly and Justin Oberman.

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As our nation begins to recover from the significant economic fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are all clearly seeing the value of highly functioning, activated supply chains. Though difficult, the unique challenges of this pandemic have inspired ingenuity and sparked solutions to some of our new problems.

The Biden administration's partnership with states and private-sector companies to reach 4 million vaccinations each day in every corner of the country is the result of creativity and agility, exactly what we need to end this crisis and be better equipped for the next one.

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Yet now is the time to make lasting changes in how we communicate, coordinate and collaborate. The American Jobs Plan, which will provide much-needed and overdue funding to rebuild and strengthen critical transportation and logistics infrastructure, should be the impetus for additional steps to engage top talent to help us develop new solutions.

We need to act earlier rather than brush off precise warnings about dangerous risks. Our inaction in the face of such intelligence before the Sept. 11 attacks, Hurricane Katrina, the possibility of a global pandemic and the Jan. 6 attack on the Capitol is inexcusable, particularly since our repeated failures are so similar to one another.

We are fortunate to have world-class talent and deep reserves of capital right here in the United States to help us better prepare for crises. Just in the 2nd District of Illinois, there

are nationally critical supply chain assets including highways, rail, maritime, industrial manufacturing and distribution for e-commerce.

But to date, we fail to develop or access these kinds of critical resources until after too much damage has been done. We need to better organize our resources and logistical systems to address nation-altering events in an increasingly dangerous world.

We need to harmonize how talent and capital, and the requirements we need them to fulfill, come together. This has to happen in the White House, Congress, state, county and municipal governments, along with the private sector, from Fortune 500 companies to startups in garages and everyone in between.

President Biden has issued two thorough executive orders on supply chain: **one** focused on the pandemic, **one** that mandates key actions and capabilities for all major Cabinet agencies. Both of these orders illustrate a key concept we must address: While private sector capabilities can help us achieve societal imperatives, commercial incentives are mis-aligned with societal needs.

We need a new, holistic risk approach to overcome our supply chain challenges.

Private-sector advancements in just-in-time warehousing and delivery, asset-light inventory management and revenue-maximizing geo-location of stores and facilities are already impressive, and our capabilities are only accelerating.

Meanwhile, government is, or should be, focused on minimizing loss of life, mitigating economic disruption and ensuring equitable distribution of goods and services. This includes building stockpiles, establishing nationwide distribution points and funding technologies that the private sector may not otherwise create.

Yet often the economics of risk and emergency management are warped. It is expensive to stockpile supplies. It is challenging to build technology for events that may occur years in the future. It is risky to cater to a small number of very big customers. This too often discourages the government from seeking assistance in advance or the private sector from responding to such calls.

We need to help our best talent—inventors, innovators and mentors—overcome the challenges, real and perceived, of working to address societal risks. We need to support state, county and municipal officials who are closest to our neighbors and their businesses in need, but who have the least financial flexibility to provide assistance.

If 2020—which began with a once-in-century pandemic and ended with early deployment of a vaccine targeted to that very virus—taught us anything, it is that we can activate all levels of government and industry for good when we choose to do so. If we take the steps necessary to strengthen our supply chains now, we will be in much better shape for our next pandemic.

U.S. Rep. Robin Kelly, D-Matteson, is vice-chair of House Energy & Commerce Committee and serves on the Oversight & Reform Committee. She also co-chairs the House Democratic Policy Group and House Tech Accountability Caucus.

Justin P. Oberman helped set up the Transportation Security Administration after Sept. 11 and served as an executive at the Department of Homeland Security. He is the founder of [Assemble](#), which aims to improve how we strengthen supply chains to manage risk.

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