



# PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

## The Quest for the Coronavirus Progenitor: Integrating Intelligence and Science

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:** The integration of intelligence and science will be the key to uncovering the genomic origin and direct source of the virus that sparked the COVID-19 pandemic. Both the Fact Sheet issued by the US Department of State and recent elaborations by closely involved US officials clearly illustrate that such integration is vital. Intelligence is critical, as China continues to refuse to provide complete information for an inquiry into the possibility of an unnatural contagion scenario.

As a consequence of the unconvincing findings of the China-led WHO investigation on the emanation of COVID-19, the quest for the SARS-CoV-2 primal strain, the virus that gave rise to the pandemic, has been amplified. That quest, posed initially as an intelligence challenge in January 2020, made a quantum leap in January 2021, when the US Department of State issued a Fact Sheet largely based on intelligence.

The document states, *inter alia*, that “The previously undisclosed information in this Fact Sheet, combined with open-source reporting, highlights three elements about COVID-19’s origin that deserve greater scrutiny”:

### 1. Illnesses inside the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV):

- The US government has reason to believe that several researchers inside the WIV became sick in autumn 2019, before the first identified case of the outbreak, with symptoms consistent with both COVID-19 and common seasonal illnesses. This raises questions about the credibility of WIV senior researcher Shi Zhengli’s public claim that there was “zero infection” among the WIV’s staff and students of SARS-CoV-2 or SARS-related viruses.
- Accidental infections in labs have caused several previous virus

outbreaks in China and elsewhere, including a 2004 SARS outbreak in Beijing that infected nine people, killing one.

- The CCP has prevented independent journalists, investigators, and global health authorities from interviewing researchers at the WIV, including those who were ill in the fall of 2019. Any credible inquiry into the origin of the virus must include interviews with these researchers and a full accounting of their previously unreported illness.

## **2. Research at the WIV:**

- Starting in at least 2016, and with no indication of a stop prior to the COVID-19 outbreak, WIV researchers conducted experiments involving RaTG13, the bat coronavirus identified by the WIV in January 2020 as its closest sample to SARS-CoV-2 (96.2% similar). The WIV became a focal point for international coronavirus research after the 2003 SARS outbreak and has since studied animals including mice, bats, and pangolins.
- The WIV has a published record of conducting “gain-of-function” research to engineer chimeric viruses. But the WIV has not been transparent or consistent about its record of studying viruses most similar to the COVID-19 virus, including RaTG13, which it sampled from a cave in Yunnan Province in 2013 after several miners [who had entered the cave] died of a SARS-like illness.
- WHO investigators must have access to the records of the WIV’s work on bat and other coronaviruses before the COVID-19 outbreak. As part of a thorough inquiry, they must have a full accounting of why the WIV altered and then removed online records of its work with RaTG13 and other viruses.

## **3. Secret military activity at the WIV:**

- Secrecy and non-disclosure are standard practice for Beijing. For many years the US has publicly raised concerns about China’s past biological weapons work, which Beijing has neither documented nor demonstrably eliminated, despite its clear obligations under the Biological Weapons Convention.
- Despite the WIV presenting itself as a civilian institution, the US has determined that the WIV has collaborated on publications and secret projects with China’s military. The WIV has engaged in classified research, including laboratory animal experiments, on

behalf of the Chinese military since at least 2017.

- The US and other donors who funded or collaborated on civilian research at the WIV have a right and obligation to determine whether any of our research funding was diverted to secret Chinese military projects at the WIV.

The report continues, “Today’s revelations just scratch the surface of what is still hidden about COVID-19’s origin in China. Any credible investigation into the origin of COVID-19 demands complete, transparent access to the research labs in Wuhan, including their facilities, samples, personnel, and records.”

This text speaks for itself. It generated a highly consequential breakthrough in terms of disclosing intelligence integrated with scientific analyses and amplified the need to decipher the real roots of the pandemic in China.

Key individuals involved in creating the Fact Sheet have offered valuable information that helps us understand it. In interviews with the media, they have provided detailed explanations of how the Fact Sheet was created, its contents, and possible implications.

In an interview, former deputy national security adviser Matt Pottinger said,

There is a growing body of evidence that the lab [WIV] is likely the most credible source of the virus ...[The Fact Sheet] was a very carefully crafted statement, carefully crafted so as not to overstate the case that it was making. The case it was making was for following up on these important leads. So this was a document that was scrubbed by every department within every bureau within the State Department, was looked at very carefully by the National Security Council staff, intelligence officers, Health and Human Services. This was not a haphazard set of allegations...

Former British Conservative Party leader Iain Duncan-Smith, who was present at a meeting with Pottinger, said, “I was told the US have an ex-scientist from the laboratory [WIV] in America... That was what I heard... I was led to believe this is how they [the US] have been able to stiffen up their position on how this outbreak originated.” Also, last September, a PLA doctor who defected to an unspecified European nation provided information on Beijing’s biowarfare program that reached the US intelligence community—information that was apparently used in the Fact Sheet.

Dr. Miles Yu, formerly the principal China policy and planning adviser at the State Department, said, “...There are a lot of things [dealing] with the methods and sources. We interviewed many top-notch scientists in this field. They

have their reviews. Then one of the conditions [according to which] they would talk to us was obviously to withhold their identities. We have a lot of internal information on this, even though [it is] not direct... This intelligence disclosure is a pretty bureaucratically long-lasting process, but [there is] no willingness to withhold the information.”

Dr. David Asher, who led the State Department investigation into the roots of COVID-19, contributed the most, so his interviews are worth a particularly close look. The following excerpts provide a panoramic view of his insights.

#### **About the Chinese system:**

The Chinese have made it clear they see biotechnology as a big part of the future of hybrid warfare... We didn't come at this saying: Let's go blame the Chinese. But we...had to appreciate the nature of the Chinese government. This is a government that since 2007 has been writing publicly about genetic warfare... The Chinese government, at the leadership of the People's Liberation Army (PLA), and even at Xi Jinping's level himself, have at least suggested that bio war is the future of war in some ways, even going beyond nuclear war. I don't know quite what that means, but when I start to read that in publications which are not classified but not well read because they're in Chinese and they're aimed at a Chinese audience, you start to say, "What are they talking about?"... On Chinese national TV [in 2017], there was an interesting media commentary by their lead PLA commentator on the nightly news in China where he talked about that, [saying] "we have entered into an area of Chinese bio warfare, including using things like viruses." I mean, they made a public statement to their people that this is a new priority... You need to understand the context of Chinese hybrid warfare. You need to understand the nature of the communist state in China, and its secretive dual use approach to everything military, to be able to appreciate it.

#### **About the related facilities located in Wuhan:**

I started to follow the money into a number of installations...around the Wuhan Institute of Virology, which has two campuses, not one. We had to look at the personnel list there... [We traced] the development of coronavirus-related disease vectors, which could be used as weapons, could be used for bio events. They were excluded from the Chinese declarations of biological defense programs in the 2016-2017 period, after years of SARS being a priority issue that the Chinese said in an unclassified statement declared to the international community in

Geneva. That disappeared at the same time that the level four laboratory kicked off initial operations, and they accelerated this apparent military-funded program. I doubt that that's a coincidence. Did they stop talking about this as a bio defense area because they decided to make it a bio offense area? We don't know. I would not assume that they didn't.

In 2012... [China] had the first case in history of a bat-borne coronavirus going directly into a human... That was a revolutionary, not evolutionary, event in science. Why did they cover it up and [ostensibly] lock it away in some freezer [in Wuhan]? I certainly don't believe that. That would be another thing. We have to understand that they were [involved] in bat-borne, live bat research at the Wuhan Institute. Something which they never admitted, but they have patents publicly for their bat containment vessels that they have at their institute. There's all sorts of things that are hiding in plain sight. What we did was take what was hiding in plain sight and then combine it with some high-end information collected by our intelligence community, only a swath of which was declassified... There was a lab leak at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and its associated laboratories, one of which is involved with making vaccines across the street.

Notably, Dr. Asher pointed to work at the Wuhan Institute of Biological Products, an adjacent facility run jointly by the Wuhan Institute of Virology with Sinopharm, a state-owned firm thought to have been investigating a vaccine to combat all coronaviruses. Intriguingly, Sinopharm CEO Yu Qingming disclosed in an interview how China had approved "conditional sales" of his firm's vaccine on February 25, 2020, with senior managers given the job in March of that year. Dr. Asher said, "What is interesting is evidence that certain scientists have found... that there was adenovirus presence in the sequences posted in the European [databases] publicly. Adenovirus means they were vectors of a vaccine [strain] present for COVID-19. That could indicate that there was a biodefense program, that they were putting a vaccine together... To develop a vaccine in advance for something that would never see the light of day is sort of ridiculous, but it is totally consistent with a biological weapons program... Whether they were developing this vaccine, if it exists as an antidote, hard to know."

**About the direct source of the virus that infected Patient Zero** (given that China claims that Patient Zero appeared on December 8, 2019):

The key thing that was declassified is the first known cluster that we're aware of, of victims we believe to be COVID-19... Three scientists [at the Wuhan Institute of Virology] are believed to have become ill with a

mysterious respiratory condition in the second week of November 2019. Hard to conclude definitely it was COVID-19, but it seems highly likely. According to credible information from a well-connected foreign government, the wife of one researcher died later in November... There is a possibility it was influenza, but I am very doubtful that three people in highly protected circumstances working on coronaviruses would all get sick with influenza that put them in a hospital or in severe conditions all in the same week, and it didn't have anything [to do] with the coronavirus. That's highly hard to believe... I am confident the information we provided was based on accurate sources. We would have never provided it if we didn't believe, based on other information, that the cluster was the source of the (COVID-19) outbreak.

Independently of the above, a leading article published in *Science* on March 18, 2021 said, "Our results define the period between mid-October and mid-November 2019 as the plausible interval when the first case of SARS-CoV-2 emerged in Hubei province [where Wuhan is located]."

#### **About the genomic origin of the virus that infected Patient Zero:**

I heard from very well established scientists at our national labs who did not want to be quoted, who were very fearful of consequences, that they found peculiarities in the exact [virus genomic] sequences that people at the WHO and others are saying are pristine, there's nothing irregular about them. They [the US national lab scientists] said no, they have seen plenty of things that are irregular in their...sequences. That's a fundamental scientific fact that I have not seen addressed adequately... There are curiosities and artifacts in the sequences themselves that are extremely disturbing... There are plenty of indications in the sequence itself that [the initial pandemic virus] may have been synthetically altered. It has the backbone of a bat [coronavirus], combined with a pangolin receptor binder, combined with some sort of humanized mice transceptor. These things don't actually make sense. The pattern of natural evolution of COVID-19—speaking with many scientists who follow this over the world—[is such that] the odds this could be natural are very low... [but this is attainable] through deliberate scientific gain of function research, which was most definitely published and going on at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, and quite a few other places in China... This might have been a weapons vector gone awry, not deliberately released but in development, and then somehow leaked. This has turned out to be the greatest weapon in history... This was a man-made pathogenic weapons vector in development that had very important stealth

features which allowed it to spread in a way we have never seen a coronavirus spread... They were engaged in a shocking range of dangerous experiments into highly pathogenic, man-made versions of COVID-like viruses in Wuhan... A lab leak is not 100% certain, but it seems at this stage the only logical source of origin... If the Chinese do not come forward with the truth, or we do not sort out this disaster, it is one of the greatest failures in the history of human society.

### **About the Chinese cover-up:**

Dr. Miles Yu added in this regard,

Xi Jinping's first meeting to talk about, focus on this virus, was January 7 [2020]. He called a bureau meeting talking about this. What exactly he said, what exactly [he] instructed, we'll never know. But all we know is following an authority in which there is a systemic government gagging of any information about the virus... China's bio safety standard is really low and is very dangerous. This was an accident (of virus leakage) waiting to happen. The most important thing is we're going to find out exactly what happened. The biggest obstacle to all of this is the Chinese Communist Party. ...the world should be really, really worried about the behavior pattern of the Chinese Communist Party... China's many practices and its behaviors are out of the range of international inspection and international monitoring. It has been doing a lot of things that are kind of very dangerous. One of the issues obviously is in the area of virus research and bioweapons development.

What's circumstantial is the real origin of COVID-19, because we don't have direct evidence to point out to the exact origin of that. There is a lot of circumstantial evidence, that's true. That's circumstantial because of the obstruction of the Chinese Communist Party...[which] has endeavored to seriously cover up. That's really, really certain and unambiguous... There was no international supervision. There was no international corporation in this core research. It's very exclusive, secret, and as our intelligence discussion pointed out, has secured the weapons of a risk project with the People's Liberation Army... One of the hardest-hit groups of people by the Chinese Communist Party's cover-up are their scientists. Many of them were forced into silence and some of them even disappeared. For those people who want to cooperate with the international scientific community, their voice is gone.

The above interviews by closely involved US officials are unprecedented and groundbreaking—but the picture they paint is probably just the tip of the

iceberg. As long as China persists in its refusal to entirely disclose the full and authentic data and specimens relating to the genomic origin and direct source of the virus that infected Patient Zero, plus previously related data and specimens, it will remain essential to integrate intelligence with science. Properly done, such integration is apt to overshadow Beijing's unscrupulous refusal to cooperate and decipher how, when, and where the virus and the contagion came into being.

Documents recently obtained by the British paper the *Daily Mail* support the claim that the WIV and the Chinese military cooperate in secret. They reveal a classified joint project for exploring the potential of animal viruses toward humans, led by Shi Zhengli (principal investigator of SARS-like coronaviruses at the WIV) and Colonel Cao Wuchin (Academy of Military Medical Sciences of the PLA, director of the Military Biosafety Expert Committee, and member of the WIV's Advisory Board). The project began in 2012, the year six Chinese miners were mysteriously infected by a SARS-resembling bat virus that ultimately killed three of them.

For now, a critical mass of knowledge combining science and intelligence, and accounting for an objective judgment with regard to an unnatural initial contagion of the pandemic, appears to have been accumulated. Some intelligence agencies, in the US and elsewhere, are still keeping a lot of their information classified. If the assessment of the Foreign Intelligence Service of the Russian Federation or of the Main Intelligence Directorate of the Russian Armed Forces, for example, is that the initial contagion in Wuhan was natural, this would have already been brought out by Moscow — yet it has not done so.

While intelligence is essential, it can be problematic, particularly in terms of classification. This was made apparent in Canada with regard to an ostensibly collateral incident.

Last March, the head of the Public Health Agency of Canada, Iain Stewart, blamed an ongoing Canadian police investigation for his refusal to tell Parliament's Special Committee on Canada-China Relations why the agency had fired a husband-and-wife senior scientific team in connection with suspicious visits they had made to the WIV in 2019 and shipment of live viruses (not including coronaviruses) via an Air Canada flight. For the most part, the main actor was the wife, Dr. Xiangguo Qiu, an outstanding Chinese scientist born in Tianjin and head, until her suspension, of the Vaccine Development and Antiviral Therapies section of the Canadian Special Pathogens Programme.

The following dialogue took place between Stewart and the committee:

“Why were they let go?”

"I'm not really at liberty to talk about that, sir."

"What do you mean, you're 'not at liberty' to talk about that? You're in a parliamentary committee here... Mr. Stewart, has there ever been a case where any government lab has fired scientists as a result of security breaches?"

"That's a very difficult question to answer."

"...Mr. Stewart, this is a critical issue of national security. Has any lab in this country ever fired a scientist as a result of a security breach or the improper transfer of viruses? You're a public servant. People deserve an answer."

"I'm not able to answer the question as it was structured," said Stewart, adding he was constrained by the Privacy Act, security matters, and the ongoing police probe.

"You gave us three rationales for not answering... There is a fourth one, and that is just bureaucratic butt-covering, incompetence, malfeasance in the department. The reasons you gave us are far from exhaustive..."

This highly significant affair certainly involved, beyond the efforts of the Canadian police, efforts by the Canadian Security Intelligence Service to fill informational gaps. Is there any connection between those gaps and the removal of consequential records about coronaviruses by the WIV? This remains to be found out. The enigmatic Dr. Qiu (and her husband) still represents a meaningful challenge for both China and Canada.

This issue, and the related ones detailed above, will be clarified when a full summation of the intelligence held by the US, Canada, the UK, France, Australia, Japan, India, and Taiwan is attained—perhaps earlier.

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