

Pervasive Geopolitics, Elusive Science: The Quest for the Origins of SARS CoV-2

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Summary

The COVID-19 crisis has emerged at a time when the world has been witnessing a renewed geopolitical rivalry, and the pandemic has accentuated it. As a result, the quest for the origins of the SARS CoV-2 has remained elusive, even after a long-awaited investigation done by the WHO. Geopolitics seems to have been the final arbiter of the probe, rather than science. The blame of “creating” the virus aimed at China has been deflected by the country using its clout over the investigation, to cast doubts outside its borders. As a result of the current geopolitical environment, the probability of zeroing in on the source of the virus appears bleak.

Introduction: The Need to Trace the Origins of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic has been ravaging nations across the world for more than a year. The pandemic has lashed the global population in multiple waves and the SARS CoV-2 virus which is responsible for it has taken the form of numerous mutant variants. As a result, around one percent of the world's population has got infected, and close to two percent of them have deceased. The global economy has taken a big setback due to the disruption created by the pandemic, and the multiple waves in different parts of the world has hindered any effort of an overall recovery. Globalization in the physical realm is under the constant threat of being “quarantined” on a frequent basis, with restrictions in international travel and the hardening of borders.

In such a time, it becomes essential for the global community to search for the origins of this existential threat that has eclipsed the world. Such a quest could lead to the possible invention of cures as well as the development of more effective vaccines. Moreover, it could help identify and prevent future pandemics. However, what should have ideally been a unified quest by nations across the world has turned out to be a partisan affair of a blame game. The pandemic has come at a time when the great power rivalry has made a comeback in global geopolitics. COVID-19 has accentuated differences between rivals, overturning cooperative endeavours, heating up the competition, and widening the potential for conflicts. The era of a Cold War 2.0 may have already dawned,¹ and this has made the pursuit for the source of this current scourge on humanity difficult, if not impossible.

The WHO-China Joint Study: Key Findings

To understand the source of the virus, the international community has been demanding investigations at the global level. The World Health Organization (WHO), after repeated attempts, finally got the green light from China to conduct a field study in the country from where the pandemic started. Subsequently, a year after COVID-19 went global, seventeen members of the WHO team landed in Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak which started the pandemic. The objective of the mission was to conduct a joint study with seventeen Chinese experts on the possible origins of the virus. The probe lasted for four weeks in 2021, from 14 January to 10 February. The investigation included visits of the WHO team to the Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV) of the Chinese Academy of Sciences, alleged to be a possible site of origin of the virus, as well as the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market, supposedly the “ground zero” of the pandemic.

At the end of the study, the WHO team came up with a joint report with their Chinese counterparts about the findings of the probe.² In a nutshell, they evaluated the likelihood of four scenarios of the origin of the virus – direct zoonotic transmission, introduction through intermediate host followed by zoonotic transmission, introduction through the cold/food chain, and introduction through a laboratory incident. Out of these four, the “lab leak” hypothesis was found to be extremely unlikely, and the possibility of an intermediate host was inferred to be the most likely scenario. Though a direct zoonotic spillover was gauged as likely, the “cold/food chain” hypothesis was evaluated to be possible. Clearly, the study did not prove to be a decisive one that could provide a solid answer to the international community.

Moreover, the study created controversy by stirring up a flurry of criticisms, based on the numerous loopholes apparent since the very beginning of the mission.

The Lab Leak Hypothesis: Questions Remain

Ever since the beginning of the pandemic crisis, China has been under the shadow of suspicion with regard to the origins of the virus. Several theories have come up regarding the origins of the virus, and among them, the “lab leak” hypothesis turned out to be detrimental to the image of China and its ruling Communist Party of China (CPC).³ Though there has been only marginal support for this possibility from the side of scientists, the theory has attained much popularity outside the mainstream.⁴ However, the Donald Trump administration, apparently based on intelligence assessments, have been very vocal about this possibility.⁵ The WHO has been criticized for being soft on China since the start of the crisis. Tedros Adhanom Gabreyesus, the Director of the WHO, has been known for his close relationship with China. His stance on China, which often gave an impression of defending the country’s initial response towards the pandemic, was not viewed favourably by certain sections of the international community, most notably the previous US administration.⁶ The US even withdrew from the WHO on account of the growing asymmetric influence of China in the organization.⁷ The move, rather than nudging the WHO to a more neutral ground, may have produced a converse effect.

It is in this context that the joint study has taken place. After the findings were publicized by the end of March 2021, the Joe Biden administration of the US criticized the opaqueness of the investigation, though adopting a much diluted stance than the previous Trump administration.⁸ The US,

together with 13 other countries came up with a joint statement, questioning the credibility of the study.⁹ In addition to this, a group of scientists from 24 countries came together to draft an open letter, accusing that the investigation was politically manipulated by China.¹⁰ The crux of the accusations was that the Chinese government dragged its feet on allowing the investigation, then set the terms for the investigation, and further did not provide access to certain critical raw data, as well as insisted on vetting the findings. The WHO was also put at fault by highlighting that the team took the Chinese arguments uncritically, and did not exercise objectivity in the selection of team members. The presence of at least one of the team members with a clear conflict of interest was certainly glossed over.¹¹ The team allegedly also diminished the possibility of the “lab leak” hypothesis, justifying it with lack of evidence. The same logic could also have been used to discard the “cold/food chain” hypothesis, which they did not.

The accusations got more teeth with Tedros himself accepting the lack of access to raw data of early cases.¹² These accusations were rebuffed by China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, China’s nationalist media, as well as Liang Wannian, who led the Chinese counterpart of the WHO team.¹³ They put forward defensive counter-arguments that the WHO agreed to the terms of the probe, and that certain data could not be provided due to domestic legal restrictions. They denied any manipulative role of China and emphasized that the country was transparent to the WHO field study. They also accused the West and the US of pressurizing the WHO to malign China’s image. Moreover, China went on a counter-offensive that similar studies should be conducted in other countries like Italy, France, and Brazil, where there have been certain sketchy pieces of evidence of COVID-19 emerging even before the

outbreak in Wuhan. They also challenged the US specifically to accept investigations into its critical biological lab facilities like Fort Detrick, which has been cited by certain sources in China as a source of the virus. China also buttressed the “cold/food chain” hypothesis by alleging that the virus could have entered China through cold chains. The food which was transported to the foreign athletes of the Seventh World Military Games held in Wuhan in October 2020, just months before the first case was reported, was especially suspected in this context.¹⁴ However, these arguments largely remain as allegations and lacking any evidence, as compared to the “lab leak”, where there is at least a smoking gun.

Conclusion: Way Ahead to Ground Zero

It looks fairly clear that the WHO investigation into the origins of the virus ended up with findings that China has no complaints about, but others do. Though the WHO team has given an interim verdict favourable for China geopolitically, the hard work of the team has nevertheless been acknowledged by countries like the US. There seems to be an understanding that with the WHO’s imperative to get more data from China, certain compromise of sorts could have been arrived at during the investigation. At the same time, the organization has to face the wrath of countries that feel China needs to be taken to task, based on intelligence assessments about a probable “lab leak”. The WHO investigation, which was supposed to be given the “lab leak” hypothesis a burial, seems to have actually created counter-productive results. The “lab leak” argument seems to have been resurrected, and China has therefore been consistently pushing the possibility of a “ground zero” outside its borders. As the geopolitics fuelled blame game seems to further continue, the scientific

truth about the virus origins seems to have become the casualty. As time goes on, the possibility to find the virus origins could only reduce, as possible pieces of evidence keep disappearing from view. The way ahead to the “ground zero” may eventually end up with several “ground zeros”, as parallel narratives spin divergent pathways to the past, while the virus surges forward into the future.

Disclaimer: The views expressed in the article are personal.

Endnotes:

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