

Still no evidence for COVID ‘lab leak’ theory

Media mouthpieces of the Anglo-American empire’s “War Party” are doing their utmost to reinvigorate the theory that the virus which causes COVID-19 was created in and escaped from China’s Wuhan Institute of Virology (WIV). Proponents of the theory imply that new evidence has emerged to support it, but in fact none has. Whilst some American scientists who dismissed the theory when it was first raised early last year are now equivocating, this can by and large be put down to fear of being smeared as Chinese agents, which in the McCarthyite atmosphere that prevails in US academia today could easily destroy their careers. Lab accidents have happened before, and surely will again; but the far greater danger is that today’s toxic political climate kills off crucially important international scientific cooperation, without which mankind would be left unacceptably vulnerable to future viral pandemics that might make COVID look like child’s play.



News Corp’s Sharri Markson repeatedly reports false and discredited claims sourced from intelligence agencies that are intended to stoke tensions with China, not solve scientific questions. Photo: Screenshot

In Australia the main media spruiker of the lab leak hypothesis continues to be Sharri Markson, the Australian newspaper’s alleged investigative reporter, who has published a series of articles on the subject based on “research” for her forthcoming book *What Really Happened [sic!] in Wuhan*. The term “research” is used loosely here, since for more than a year Markson’s evidence has consisted solely of material attributed to unnamed “Western” intelligence sources, which turns out in every case to have been misleadingly repackaged information already in the public domain. In the 2 May 2020 *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, for example, Markson reported that China had “deliberately suppressed or destroyed evidence of the coronavirus outbreak in an ‘assault on international transparency’ that cost tens of thousands of lives, according to a dossier prepared by concerned Western governments”. Two days later, however, the rival *Sydney Morning Herald* revealed that the supposed dossier was in fact merely “a research document shared ... under the Five Eyes intelligence arrangement” between the USA, UK, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, which “was mostly based on news reports and *contained no material from intelligence gathering*” (emphasis added).¹ And in her attempt last month to revive the theory, Markson’s “exclusive” report that Chinese military and public health officials had been working on weaponising coronaviruses since 2015 was quickly debunked, including by some of the very “experts” she cited, as being based on a book that has been freely available online for years, which speculated that the 2002 Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) coronavirus might have originated as a US bioweapon.²

Markson’s latest effort is more of the same. In a 25 May article headlined “US scientists caught in Wuhan intrigue”, she “revealed” that the “chief science officer, a laboratory director, a former commander and a research contractor” at the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID) based at Fort Detrick, Maryland “have been involved with the Wuhan Institute of Virology, even visiting its laboratories where risky research on coronaviruses took place.” The article goes on to name several of said personnel, and detail various conferences, field studies, publications and other collaboration between them and WIV staff, which Markson insinuates represents Chinese infiltration of USAMRIID.

The real story

Once again the problem for Ms Markson is that *none of this is new information*, nor was it ever a secret; rather, she has again re-cast obscure but innocuous public knowledge as evidence of a sinister plot. Yet the closest she can come to a direct connection is that “USAMRIID’s former chief scientific officer, Sina Bavari [whose five-year term ended in September 2019], sits on the editorial board of [WIV lab director and world-leading bat-borne coronavirus expert] Dr Shi [Zhengli’s] virology journal, *Virologica Sinica*, and has visited the Wuhan Institute of Virology for a board meeting.” And even so, she had to report that when she approached Bavari for comment he was adamant that USAMRIID “has no connection whatsoever to [WIV] or any other institute in China. Being on an editorial board of a journal is not the same as helping a Chinese institute of this and that to do something.” USAMRIID staff did indeed visit the WIV from time to time, including to present at conferences, he said; but at the institutional level, “We absolutely had no connection to them whatsoever.”

Moreover, it is also a matter of public record that US and other international experts helped China design and set up the WIV's biosafety labs and their procedures in the first place.

Virology labs are set up according to four internationally standardised "biosafety levels" (BSLs), also known as P (for "pathogen" or "protection") levels, comprising various combinations of procedures, personal protective equipment and inbuilt safety features. They rank in ascending order from one to four; thus non-lethal pathogens that present minimal risk are studied in BSL-1 labs, while BSL4 facilities work with severe-to-fatal pathogens, especially those which are easily transmitted and/or have no known cure, into which category fall the SARS and even deadlier MERS (Middle East Respiratory Syndrome) coronaviruses. Designs vary according to the type of research conducted, but all involve multiple layers of physical containment, independent air supply, and decontamination for all personnel and material entering and leaving the lab. In short, the only manmade environment that is both more secure and self-contained than a BSL-4 lab is a space station.



The Wuhan Institute of Virology, which is a world-class facility established after the 2004 SARS outbreak with the assistance of France, and the US scientific community. Photo: AFP/Hector Retamal

When SARS broke out in 2002 China had no biosafety-rated labs in which to study it, so in 2004 the Chinese Academy of Sciences enlisted aid from France to design and construct a full suite of them at the WIV. The institute's BSL-4 lab was commissioned in 2015. As revealed in two cables from US diplomats in China to the State Department in Washington DC dated January and April 2018, which were made public in April of last year, the US government funded WIV's research both directly through its National Institute of Health (NIH) and Agency for International Development (USAID) and indirectly via grants to several private and university-based American research institutes. Furthermore, the April 2018 cable stated, "experts from the NIH-supported P4 lab at the University of Texas Medical Branch in Galveston have trained Wuhan lab technicians in lab management and maintenance", one of whom had spent two full years at the Galveston lab. Meanwhile the United States Centres for Disease Control and Prevention had sent experts to help get the WIV up to speed, "and the institute also sent one scientist to US CDC headquarters in Atlanta [Georgia] for six months' work on influenza." And far from expressing misgivings about either the funding arrangements or the close collaboration between US and Chinese scientists and institutions, the US diplomats declare that the WIV, "a global leader in virus research, is a key partner for the United States in protecting global health security" (emphasis added), whose role in operating China's first BSL-4 lab "opens up even more opportunity for expert exchange". And they urged Washington to give the WIV *more* funding, not less.

US President Joe Biden announced 23 May that the 16 agencies of the US intelligence community had "coalesced around two likely scenarios" (that is, the actually quite unlikely lab-leak, versus the natural origin thesis), but could not reach consensus, the USA's ABC News reported. "[W]hile two elements in the IC leans [sic] towards the former scenario and one leans more towards the latter—each with low or moderate confidence", the article continued, "the majority ... do not believe there is sufficient information to assess one to be more likely than the other." Therefore, Biden has ordered the USIC to "redouble their efforts" to reach a conclusion one way or another, in the form of an official Intelligence Estimate to be delivered within 90 days. Ominously, the London Telegraph reported exclusively on 28 May that "British intelligence officials have conducted their own investigation into the origins of the pandemic following claims that COVID came from a laboratory in China", and are now "co-operating with the new American investigation in an attempt to establish the truth". In 2003 intelligence on "weapons of mass destruction" falsified by Britain's spy agency MI6 provided the George W. Bush administration the excuse it needed for its long-planned war on Iraq, which killed an estimated one million Iraqi civilians and sowed terrorism and destruction throughout the Middle East.

This COVID-19 origin debate must not be allowed to turn into a repeat performance against China.

By Richard Bardon, Australian Alert Service, 2 June 2021

Footnotes:

1. "[Aus media's anti-China spin turns reality upside down](#)", AAS, 6 May 2020.

2. "[China-haters run for cover as Newscorp 'virus warfare' propaganda implodes](#)", AAS, 19 May 2021.