



## **Bio-warfare Narratives May Chill Pandemic Cooperation**

**Dr. Christina Lin**

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### **Abstract**

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After a temporary détente between the US and China to put aside the blame game and cooperate to fight Covid-19, it seems conspiracy theories are once again flaring up and sabotaging joint efforts to control the pandemic. Washington is pushing a narrative that the virus may have escaped from a Wuhan bioweapons lab, while Beijing has a counter-narrative that US soldiers may have brought the virus from a Fort Detrick bioweapons lab to the October Military Games in Wuhan. As this escalates, and just as both countries are flattening the curve to consider reopening their economies, the sudden tit-for-tat bio-warfare narratives may throw both countries back into chaos.

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### **About the Author of this Issue**

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Dr. Christina Lin is a California-based foreign policy analyst. She has extensive US government experience working on national security policy planning, including at DoD, State, and NSC, and was a research consultant at Jane's Information Group's Chemical, Biological, Radiological & Nuclear Assessments Intelligence Centre.



*Christina Lin*



## Analysis

After a temporary détente between the US and China to put aside the blame game and cooperate to fight Covid-19, it seems conspiracy theories are once again flaring up and sabotaging joint efforts to control the pandemic.

On Monday a Washington Post article cited State Department cables insinuating that the virus may have escaped from a Wuhan virology lab, which was promoted the next day by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo on Fox News and again on Thursday by President Donald Trump during the daily coronavirus briefing.<sup>1</sup>

As this escalates, and just as Washington and Beijing are flattening the curve to cautiously consider reopening their economies, the sudden promotion of bio-warfare narratives may throw both countries back into chaos, and halt much-needed knowledge exchange and cooperation in the midst of a pandemic.<sup>2</sup>

Yet with such high-level officials on both sides promoting these theories, one wonders if they may have some credence.

### Narrative of Chinese bio-warfare

It seems there are historical reasons that provide grounds for these fringe theories.

From Washington's perspective, the conspiracy began from a January 26 *Washington Times* article that the virus' outbreak could be linked to the Wuhan Institute of Virology.<sup>3</sup> It cited Israeli intelligence officer Dany Shoham for this claim, which was later picked up by other sites and promoted by US government officials such as Senator Tom Cotton and some members of the Committee on the Present Danger: China.<sup>4</sup>

It is the sort of tale that resonates with China hawks in Washington, and the escape of deadly pathogens from research labs is not without precedent.

For example, while there is no evidence in open-source information that the 2003 SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome) epidemic was caused by leaks from labs, the 2004 SARS cases were indeed caused by leaks from a Beijing laboratory.<sup>5</sup>

Two lab researchers were first infected by SARS, which caused a small outbreak in March 2004. However, it was contained within a few months, and in this case Beijing punished five officials of the Chinese Center for Disease

<sup>1</sup> Josh Rogin, "State Department cables warned of safety issues at Wuhan lab studying bat coronaviruses", *Washington Post*, April 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2020/04/14/state-department-cables-warned-safety-issues-wuhan-lab-studying-bat-coronaviruses/>; "Secretary Mike Pompeo: We need answers and transparency from China and for WHO to do its job", Fox News, April 15, 2020, <https://video.foxnews.com/v/6149449210001#sp=show-clips>; David Smith, "Trump fans flames of Chinese lab coronavirus theory during daily briefing", <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/15/trump-us-coronavirus-theory-china>

<sup>2</sup> Jonathan Cheng, "As U.S., China Clash Over Coronavirus, Their Doctors Quietly Join Forces", *Wall Street Journal*, April 10, 2020,

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/as-u-s-china-clash-over-coronavirus-their-doctors-quietly-join-forces-11586516401>

<sup>3</sup> Bill Gertz, "Coronavirus may have originated in lab linked to China's biowarfare program", *Washington Times*, January 26, 2020, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2020/jan/26/coronavirus-link-to-china-biowarfare-program-possib/>

<sup>4</sup> Alexandra Stevenson, "Senator Tom Cotton Repeats Fringe Theory of Coronavirus Origins", *New York Times*, February 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/17/business/media/coronavirus-tom-cotton-china.html>; Yael Halon, "Steve Bannon defends Sen. Tom Cotton's controversial coronavirus origin claim", *Fox News*, March 1, 2020,

<https://www.foxnews.com/media/steve-bannon-tom-cotton-coronavirus-origin-theory-china>; Ana Swanson, "A New Red Scare is Shaping Washington", *New York Times*, July 20, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/20/us/politics/china-red-scare-washington.html>

<sup>5</sup> "WHO: Beijing Lab to Blame for SARS Outbreak-2004-04-26", *Voice of America*, October 28, 2009, <https://www.voanews.com/archive/who-beijing-lab-blame-sars-outbreak-2004-04-26>



Control and Prevention for negligence over lab safety.<sup>6</sup>

Now conspiracy theorists suspect the coronavirus that causes Covid-19 leaked from the Wuhan lab.

This is all the more plausible given recent revelations that the leading doctor in the US coronavirus task force and director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Disease (NIAID), Dr. Anthony Fauci, had outsourced bat coronavirus research to China after US declared a ban on deadly pathogen research in October 2014.<sup>7</sup> The following year Dr. Fauci gave \$3.7 million federal grant to the Wuhan lab to continue with NIAID's dangerous research.<sup>8</sup>

With right-wing media outlets fanning anger and Beijing's heavy-handed censorship unwittingly giving conspiracy theories a boost, this is risking a complete fracture of bilateral relations and impeding global cooperation to tackle the pandemic.<sup>9</sup>

### Narrative of US bio-warfare

But Beijing also has its own conspiracy theory regarding the US. From China's perspective, the grounds for its conspiracy theory are found in a February 29 *Global Research* article and a few others, which highlighted several incidents suggesting the virus may be an act of bio-warfare.<sup>10</sup>

One event is the Military World Games that took place in Wuhan between October 18 and 27, 2019, where a delegation of more than 300 US soldiers participated along with other soldiers from more than 100 nations.<sup>11</sup> Two weeks later, the first Covid-19 case was discovered in Wuhan.

Conspiracy theorists draw links between US soldiers at the Wuhan military games to the sudden August 2019 closure of the US Army's biodefense lab at Fort Detrick in Maryland due to safety violations.<sup>12</sup>

Another event occurred on the same day that the Wuhan military games opened. On October 18, the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security convened a coronavirus-pandemic tabletop exercise called "Event 201" in New York.<sup>13</sup> By coincidence, the scenario simulates an outbreak of a novel zoonotic coronavirus transmitted from bats to pigs to people, and eventually becomes transmissible from person to person, leading to a severe pandemic.

<sup>6</sup> Zhang Feng, "Officials punished for SARS virus leak", *China Daily*, July 2, 2004, [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/02/content\\_344755.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-07/02/content_344755.htm)

<sup>7</sup> Sarah Reardon, "U.S. suspends risky disease research", *Nature*, October 22, 2014, <https://www.nature.com/news/us-suspends-risky-disease-research-1.16192> Jocelyn Kaiser, David Malakoff, "U.S. halts funding for new risky virus studies, calls for voluntary moratorium", *Science Magazine*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.sciencemag.org/news/2014/10/us-halts-funding-new-risky-virus-studies-calls-voluntary-moratorium>

<sup>8</sup> Glen Owen, "Wuhan lab was performing coronavirus experiments on bats from the caves where the disease is believed to have originated—with a £3m grant from the U.S.", *Daily Mail*, April 11, 2020, <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-8211257/Wuhan-lab-performing-experiments-bats-coronavirus-caves.html> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fe-cbMLJZzU>

<sup>9</sup> Patrick Howley, "Fauci's NIAID funded Wuhan lab scientists to research Bat Coronavirus", *National File*, April 13, 2020, <https://nationalfile.com/faucis-niaid-funded-wuhan-lab-scientists-to-research-bat-coronavirus/>

<sup>10</sup> Peter Koenig, "China is Confronting the COVID-19 Epidemic. Was It Man-Made? An Act of Bio-warfare?", *Global Research*, February 29, 2020, <https://www.globalresearch.ca/china-is-confronting-the-covid19-epidemic-was-it-man-made-an-act-of-bio-warfare/5705067>

<sup>11</sup> "U.S. delegation arrives in Wuhan for Military World Games", *China Military*, October 15, 2019, [http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-10/15/content\\_9652122.htm](http://english.chinamil.com.cn/view/2019-10/15/content_9652122.htm); "Qualifying Standards for CISM Military World Games", *U.S. Armed Forces Sports*, April 26, 2019, <https://armedforcessports.defense.gov/Media/News-Stories/Article-View/Article/1824905/qualifying-standards-for-cism-military-world-games/>

<sup>12</sup> Denise Grady, "Deadly Germ Research is Shut Down at Army Lab Over Safety Concerns", *New York Times*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/health/germs-fort-detrick-biohazard.html>

<sup>13</sup> Johns Hopkins University Centre for Health Security, "The Event 201 Scenario: a tabletop exercise", <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/scenario.html>

Sponsored by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and the World Economic Forum, with players including current and former officials from the CIA, World Bank, International Monetary Fund, and pharmaceutical and public relations firms, the eerie timing of a coronavirus simulation a few weeks before the outbreak in Wuhan not only provoked conspiracy theories from the Chinese, but also others suspicious of big pharma-US government collusion.<sup>14</sup>

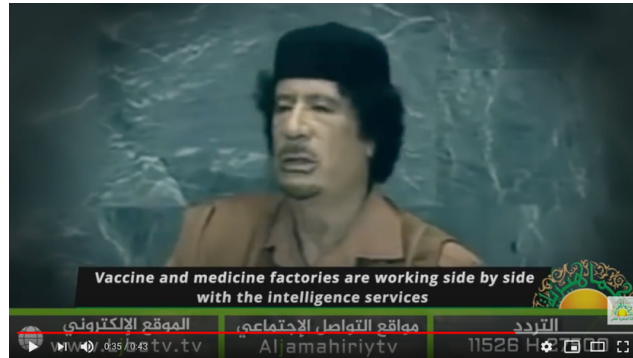
Moreover, it did not help that a coronavirus plush toy was used as an image to promote the event and given away as a souvenir, seemingly making light of a deadly virus and prompting comments on Twitter and Facebook of a big-pharma conspiracy.<sup>15</sup>



<sup>14</sup>Johns Hopkins University Centre for Health Security, “Players for Event 201, a pandemic exercise, include global business leaders and prominent government and public health leaders—livestream open to all”, October 15, 2019, <https://www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/newsroom/center-news/2019/2019-10-15-event201.html>

<sup>15</sup> [https://web.archive.org/web/20200314194423/https://twitter.com/JHSPH\\_CHS/status/1184483676924436480](https://web.archive.org/web/20200314194423/https://twitter.com/JHSPH_CHS/status/1184483676924436480) ; <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2587820948104339&set=a.1545484785671299&type=3&theater>

Now even African media are echoing the big-pharma conspiracy theory, citing the late Muammar Gaddafi's warning that "they will create the virus themselves and they will sell the antidotes afterwards ... pretending to take their time to find the solution when they already have it."<sup>16</sup>



Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yhrIBkuR3EU>

For Robert Kennedy Jr, a longtime pro-choice advocate for vaccines – that is, against forced vaccinations – this distrust in African countries is understandable, as their populations have largely been test subjects of World Health Organization and big pharma's trial vaccines.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately some of these vaccines led to health and sterilization problems, and now others have piled on against the conspiracy of a proposed digital vaccine in order to mark and track individuals who can then be released from quarantine to engage in commerce.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, given the poor safety record of both the Chinese and American biodefense labs and against the backdrop of heightened Sino-US distrust due to decoupling, Washington and Beijing have reasons to be suspicious of each other.

However, with so many lives at stake, now is not the right time to escalate bio-warfare narratives, but rather for politicians on both sides to humble themselves and emulate their own health-care workers, who are the true leaders in the war against Covid-19.<sup>19</sup>

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**Remarks:** Opinions expressed in this contribution are those of the author. This article first appeared in *Asia Times* on April 16, 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ngonah Yaya, "They will create a virus, pretend and sell the antidotes"—Gaddafi", *Afrinik*, <https://www.afrinik.com/they-will-create-a-virus-pretend-and-sell-the-antidotes-gaddafi/>

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.lewrockwell.com/political-theatre/from-robert-f-kennedy-irs-instagram-post-today/>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.sfaw.org/newswire/2014/11/13/bill-gates-and-the-anti-fertility-agent-in-african-tetanus-vaccine/>; Alex Newman, "Doctors: UN Vaccines in Kenya Used to Sterilize Women", *The New American*, November 10, 2014, <https://www.thenewamerican.com/world-news/africa/item/19497-doctors-un-vaccines-in-kenya-used-to-sterilize-women>; Chris Burt, "ID2020 and partners launch program to provide digital ID with vaccines", *Biometric Update*, September 20, 2019, <https://www.biometricupdate.com/201909/id2020-and-partners-launch-program-to-provide-digital-id-with-vaccines>; Spencer Neale, "Roger Stone accuses Bill Gates of using pandemic to push 'mandatory vaccinations and microchipping people'", *Washington Examiner*, April 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/news/roger-stone-accuses-bill-gates-of-using-pandemic-to-push-mandatory-vaccinations-and-microchipping-people>;

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=39&v=WGbYHJcMbz8&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=39&v=WGbYHJcMbz8&feature=emb_logo)

<sup>19</sup> [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkH\\_dWjYmoc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lkH_dWjYmoc)