

Biden's new investigation into possible Wuhan lab leak ramps up U.S.-China blame game

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Does it matter where the virus that causes COVID-19 came from? In terms of frontline medicine, perhaps not—patients still need to be

treated and the public health crisis managed.

But when it comes to geopolitics, it matters greatly, particularly to the United States and China. So, a new investigation into the origins of the virus must be seen in the context of a long-running [blame game](#) between the U.S. and China.

Biden's latest move

Last week, [President Joe Biden announced](#) he had ordered a further U.S. intelligence investigation into the origins of COVID-19, asking for a report back in 90 days.

He [revealed](#) the U.S. intelligence community is split between two likely scenarios—human contact with animals or a lab accident—and could not assess whether one was "more likely than the other".

This is a significant shift from early skepticism about theories involving the Wuhan Institute for Virology. Last year, [The Lancet](#) published a statement from health scientists, who said: "We stand together to strongly condemn [conspiracy theories](#) suggesting that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin."

Why is the U.S. stirring up the investigation now?

The lab accident theory has moved from [the fringe](#) to become much more [mainstream](#) in the U.S., most recently with a [Wall Street Journal article](#) last month, reporting illness among Wuhan lab workers shortly before the first cases of COVID-19.

With the Biden administration doing an excellent job bringing the COVID crisis [under control](#) in America, the fact he is still focusing on

the origin of the virus is a reminder of the [domestic politics](#) around the issue. Donald Trump promised a [conclusive report](#) and Biden can't afford to be seen as any less tough.

'Victims' versus 'saviours'

When it comes to the pandemic disaster, the U.S. wants history books to show it as the [victim of external forces](#), rather than its own mismanagement.

This was particularly the case during the Trump administration. In the face of the unfolding health crisis, it emphasized the origin of the virus, with Trump and officials referring to the ["Chinese Virus"](#) and even ["Kung Flu"](#).

The U.S. rightly criticized early Chinese mishandling, with former secretary of state Mike Pompeo vocal about China's [suppression](#) of early warnings and [lack of transparency](#). The consistent message was the pandemic was "made in China".

From the Chinese side, it wants to be remembered as the regime that showed the world how to overcome the virus, not the one that unleashed it. China has already tried to muddy the waters around the origin of the virus, even [suggesting](#) "it might be [the] U.S. army who brought the epidemic to Wuhan. "

It has emphasized its success in [battling](#) COVID-19 with enviably low case numbers.

Domestically, this is used to show the [superiority](#) of China's political and governance system. Internationally, China is trying to position itself as [a responsible, humanitarian global power](#), a country that helps others with medical supplies through its ["mask diplomacy"](#).

What do international investigations say so far?

In 2020, the 194 member states of the World Health Assembly tried to get an [independent and comprehensive](#) evaluation of the international health response to COVID-19. This was through an [Independent Panel for Pandemic Preparedness and Response](#), headed by former New Zealand prime minister Helen Clark and former Liberian president Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

In its May report, the panel was [critical](#) of China's early handling and the World Health Organization's delay in declaring an emergency. But it did not make a finding on the origins of the virus, saying the [exact transmission cycle](#) remains unknown.

The task of investigating the origins of the virus was given to a joint World Health Organization-China [technical mission](#).

The mission found the lab scenario was "extremely unlikely". But it was criticized when it came to the data made available. The U.S. said the report provided a "[partial and incomplete](#)" picture. Despite China's hopes, the report did [not resolve questions](#) about where the virus began.

Washington, D.C., called on the WHO to open a [second phase to its investigation](#), which China [rejected](#). With this avenue blocked, the Biden administration has said it will [publish the results](#) of its own inquiry.

What does this mean for Australia?

In the immediate term, there are no obvious ramifications for Australia. The [shape of U.S.-China relations](#) under Biden is clear: competitive when it should be, collaborative when it can and adversarial when it must.

The latest inquiry may bring up memories of Australia's push for an international inquiry last year, which China saw as "dancing to the tune" of the U.S. If Australia is seen to get behind the lab leak theory, this will likely be framed by China as "[Canberra trying to please Washington](#)".

So far, foreign minister Marise Payne has simply [welcomed](#) Biden's announcement while prime minister Scott Morrison has placed it within the [context](#) of the independent panel's work. We will see if defense minister Peter Dutton is more fiery, having previously [talked up the lab theory](#) after contracting the virus (ironically during a visit to the White House).

While some might say we should wait until the crisis is over to assign fault, this is never going to happen when the U.S. and China are concerned. The battle to control the COVID-19 narrative started the same day as the battle against the [virus](#) itself.

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