

The world faces a moment of truth on China

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NEW DELHI – The COVID-19 pandemic

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has changed the global geopolitical landscape, including triggering a growing backlash against China. The world wants to know why and how a local outbreak in Wuhan turned into a global pandemic that has already killed more than a quarter of a million people. The incalculable human and economic toll continues to mount.

An independent international inquiry will give China a chance to clear the air with the rest of the world. But the Chinese Communist Party vehemently opposes such a probe, viewing it as a mortal threat.

Against this background, the forthcoming session of the World Health Assembly (the decision-making body of the World Health Organization) is shaping up as a test of China's ability to block an independent investigation into the origins and spread of the new coronavirus that emerged in Wuhan. The European Union is the latest to state that it will back a resolution at the assembly calling for an independent review.

Getting to the bottom of how the COVID-19 virus flared and spread is essential for designing rapid-response efforts to prevent a future local outbreak from spiraling into another pandemic. After all, this is not the first deadly disease to spread globally from China. A Chinese coverup of the 2002-2003 SARS outbreak triggered the world's first 21st-century pandemic. Even the WHO agrees on the need for an investigation, with its representative in China saying that knowing the origins of the COVID-19 virus is "very important" to prevent "reoccurrence."

U.S. President Donald Trump has offered China an incentive for cooperation by contrasting a mistake with willful action: "If it was a mistake, a mistake is a mistake. But if they were knowingly

responsible, yeah, I mean, then sure there should be consequences.” Beijing, however, has shied away from answering even basic questions.

For example, why did China stop domestic flights from Wuhan from Jan. 23, yet allowed some international flights to continue operating from there, such as charter flights? It aided the international spread of the virus by continuing to encourage foreign travel from other Chinese cities until late March. Also, by the time it belatedly locked down Wuhan, about 5 million of its residents, according to the mayor, had already left the city, with an unknown number flying overseas from other Chinese cities. Simply put, infected travelers from Wuhan seeded outbreaks in many countries.

Another key question is why China has clamped down on further research by Chinese scientists into the virus’s origins. It instituted a new policy mandating prior vetting after several Chinese research papers highlighted dangerous work on bat coronaviruses, with one study concluding that “the killer coronavirus probably originated from a laboratory in Wuhan.”

In fact, authorities shut a Shanghai laboratory for “rectification” a day after its Jan. 12 publication of the coronavirus genome opened the global path to diagnostic tests. China, significantly, has still not shared any live virus sample with the outside world, “making it impossible to track the disease’s evolution,” to quote U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Moreover, China has not given foreign experts access to any facility or location where the virus may have originated, including the Wuhan Institute of Virology. China’s infamous “batwoman,” Shi Zhengli, was leading lab experiments there in manipulating natural coronaviruses from bats.

The dangerous research may explain why China, instead of sharing coronavirus samples with the outside world, chose to destroy its lab samples, according to Pompeo and the Beijing-based Caixin Global news site. U.S. intelligence has confirmed that it is investigating whether the pandemic was “the result of an accident at a laboratory in Wuhan.” Pompeo says there is already “enormous evidence” indicating that the virus came from the Wuhan Institute of Virology lab.

In January, while China was playing down the contagion’s threat, it was quietly engaged in a frenzied import of medical gear — from personal protective equipment to masks. According to a U.S. Department of Homeland Security intelligence report dated May 1, China “intentionally concealed the severity” of the outbreak to facilitate its hoarding. By the time the virus seriously hit Europe, China had bought up much of the global supply of protective gear, including 56 million respirators and masks in the last week of January alone.

Now, China has stepped up a crackdown at home to keep what happened at Wuhan under wraps. According to one account, grieving relatives and their lawyers have been threatened by police and volunteers “who tried to thwart the state’s censorship apparatus by preserving reports about the outbreak have disappeared.”

Just think: If China was not guilty of any coverup, wouldn’t it be welcoming the growing international calls for an independent inquiry and offering to provide assistance to such a probe? Instead, Beijing seems to be showcasing its guilt by belligerently rejecting the pleas for an inquiry. It insists the world must avoid “pointing fingers, demanding accountability and other non-constructive approaches.”

Australia, for example, has come under China’s withering attack for proposing that WHO member nations support an independent inquiry into the origins and spread of the coronavirus. The Chinese

ambassador to Australia, calling Australia's proposal "dangerous," threatened punishment through Chinese boycotts of Australian wine, beef, tourism and education sectors.

Meanwhile, as the Group of Seven countries, India and others seek a review and reform of the WHO, China's decision to give an additional \$30 million to the agency appears aimed at frustrating such calls. International rules mandate that countries notify the WHO of "a public health emergency of international concern within 24 hours of assessment." China's glaring failure to do so has led to calls for introducing WHO inspectors with the power to enter a country to probe a disease outbreak in the style of weapons inspectors.

Make no mistake: Money alone can neither aid China's strategy to deflect blame for the global crisis nor help defuse the backlash against it. Its carrot-and-stick approach of mixing financial inducements with threats will only fuel greater mistrust of Beijing.

In fact, the pandemic has made the world arrive at its moment of truth: It must break China's stranglehold on vital supply chains, including by incentivizing foreign manufacturers to move out of China, or else risk a situation in which Beijing weaponizes its leverage.

China's mercantilist expansionism has led to a spate of new regulations in the EU, Australia, Germany, Spain and Italy. But India's recent new rule mandating prior scrutiny of Chinese investment in any form — and across all sectors — is the first of its kind. Another major recent move is by Japan, which has set aside \$2.2 billion of its pandemic-linked economic support package for a specific purpose: To help Japanese firms shift manufacturing out of China.

Today, the world is looking for answers that only a thorough inquiry can reveal. If China refuses to join such a probe, it will encourage important economies to start distancing themselves from it, through

new tariffs, nontariff barriers, relocation of manufacturing and other policy moves. Such systematic “decoupling,” by undermining the communist monopoly on power, would be the CCP’s worst nightmare come true.