



If there was no coverup, why China opposing an inquiry?

BY BRAHMA CHELLANEY, OPINION CONTRIBUTOR — 05/05/20 07:30 AM EDT
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China insists it has been fully transparent and hidden nothing on the killer coronavirus, whose international spread from Wuhan has turned into the greatest global disaster of our time. So why is Beijing rancorously opposing an independent international inquiry into the origins and spread of the coronavirus?

The lethal virus emanated from China, leading to a paralyzing pandemic. The mounting socioeconomic costs of the unparalleled global crisis will remain immeasurable. In this light, is it unreasonable that the world wants to know how and why it happened?

Investigating the pandemic's genesis is critical for another reason — 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. Getting to the bottom of how the latest pathogen flared and spread is essential for designing rapid-response efforts to prevent a future local disease outbreak from spiraling into yet another pandemic.

Even the World Health Organization (WHO) agrees. This is the organization whose repeated deference helped Beijing to cover its tracks, prompting President Donald Trump to say recently that the WHO "should be ashamed of themselves because they are like the public-relations agency for China." In fact, several countries seeking an inquiry want the investigation to focus on the pandemic-related roles of both China and the WHO.

The WHO representative in China has said the "origins of virus are very important" to prevent "reoccurrence." Yet Beijing has shut out even the WHO from its COVID-19 investigations.

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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 flights from Wuhan to the rest of the country after the COVID-19 outbreak, yet allowed international flights to operate from Wuhan, thus facilitating the international spread of the virus? Or why did it recently clamp 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 a day after its January 12 publication of the coronavirus genome opened the global path to diagnostic tests. China has not shared any live virus sample with the outside world, “making it impossible to track the disease’s evolution,” to quote 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. The 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 any coronavirus sample 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.”

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? Such an inquiry would give China a chance to clear the air with the rest of the world.

Instead, Beijing seems to be showcasing its guilt by belligerently rejecting the pleas for such an inquiry, including by the European Commission president. China says such calls are destined to fail because the world, in the words of its foreign ministry, must avoid “pointing fingers, demanding accountability and other non-constructive approaches.”

Australia is Exhibit A. The country is more economically tied with China than with its security patron, the United States, which explains why it has long hedged its bets. Yet Australia has come under China’s withering attack for merely proposing that WHO member-nations support an independent inquiry into the origins and spread of the coronavirus. Australia said it will push for such an investigation at the WHO assembly (the decision-making body) when it convenes for its annual meeting on May 17.

In response, the Chinese ambassador to Australia has lashed out at his host country, threatening punishment through Chinese boycotts of Australian wine, beef and tourism and education sectors. Australia, however, is not the only country to call for a probe. Sweden, for example, has echoed Australia’s call.

Meanwhile, as the Group of Seven (G7) countries, India and others seek a review of and to reform the WHO, China’s decision to give an additional \$30 million to the agency appears aimed at frustrating such calls. International rules require countries to 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

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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 current crisis nor help defuse the increasing global backlash against it. Its carrot-and-stick approach of mixing financial inducements with threats will only fuel greater mistrust of Beijing.

China is genuinely worried that, once the crisis passes, battered countries or communities may seek a reckoning, including by suing it for damages. Trump has said that his administration is looking at a "[very substantial](#)" compensation claim against China. Against this background, Beijing has aggressively sought to rebrand itself as the world's counter-pandemic leader, while trying to rewrite the outbreak's history.

But calls are growing louder across the world to publicly hold China accountable for the pandemic's mounting human and economic toll. The only way China can silence such calls and begin to repair the serious damage to its image is through an independent international inquiry.

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If it blocks such a probe, China will pay enormous costs — not as reparations but by compelling other major economies to restructure their relationships with it, a process that ultimately would end its status as the global hub of vital supply chains. China's mercantilist expansionism has already led to a spate of new regulations in the European Union, 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](#) to help Japanese firms shift manufacturing out of China.

If China refuses to come clean, important countries are likely to start economically distancing themselves from it, through new tariffs, non-tariff barriers, relocation of manufacturing and other policy moves. Eventually, such action could undermine the communist monopoly on power in China.

Brahma Chellaney is the author of nine books, including the award-winning "Water: Asia's New Battleground" (Georgetown University Press).

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