

# Why is China resisting an independent inquiry into how the pandemic started?

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A medical worker takes a swab sample from a woman to be tested for the coronavirus next to a street in Wuhan, in China's central Hubei province on May 16, 2020. AFP

Beijing is under growing pressure from the United States, Australia and European powers to allow an international inquiry in China into the origins of the coronavirus pandemic.



South China  
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Analysts say Beijing has resisted calls from the Western powers — particularly the US — for an independent investigation into the handling and source of the outbreak for fear of how it will further dent its global image, already battered by criticism of initial cover-ups and combative Chinese efforts to reshape the narrative.

China's foreign ministry has said it would support a review "at an appropriate time", but hit out at what it described as the politicisation of the virus' origin "by the US and some other countries" for an inquiry "based on the presumption of guilt".

Scientists have not yet determined the origin of the virus or found "patient zero" of the outbreak, but a consensus of them believe it spread from animals to humans in Wuhan, central China, where the first cases were reported — including a cluster in a seafood market in which live wild animals were sold.

The World Health Organisation (WHO) has said it was in talks with China for a mission to go there to investigate the possible animal origins of the outbreak.

However, that may not quell global concerns, after criticism that the health agency has been too conciliatory towards Beijing, and given the likely exclusion from the mission of American experts and access to Wuhan laboratories that the White House has claimed may have been the virus' source, observers argued.

Angela Stanzel, associate in the Asia division of the German Institute for International and Security Affairs, said it was in Beijing's interests to maintain ambiguity about the virus origin at this stage, since waterproof evidence that China was the source "would be a public relations disaster".

"It is bad enough for China's image that the coronavirus pandemic is linked to China, so any proof is seen as equally damaging," she said. "Such proof would contradict China's attempt to find a different narrative for the origin of the virus, and in particular it may feed into the US attempt to blame China for it.

"China may allow some sort of inquiry to show the outside world that it is cooperative, but I absolutely do not see any chance for US experts to be part of this."

The issue of the coronavirus' origin, which has fostered a blame game between Beijing and Washington, will come to the fore when the World Health Assembly, the decision-making body of the WHO, convenes in a virtual meeting on Monday.

The European Union, representing its 27 member states, has said it would co-sponsor a resolution at the meeting for an "independent review" of the pandemic, which has the backing of Australia, Britain and the US. New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern has also said she is "very, very open" to supporting the inquiry.

It is not yet clear how many other United Nations member states would support a review, but Australia has been particularly proactive in lobbying other countries — including Israel and Singapore — for their support. This has sparked tensions between Canberra and Beijing, with China's ambassador to Australia suggesting it could prompt Chinese boycotts against Australian wine and beef, rhetoric that Australian officials have decried as "economic coercion".

Beijing notified the Australian government late on Monday that it would suspend imports from four large Australian beef firms, after threatening steep tariffs against Australian barley exports.

Yanzhong Huang, senior fellow for global health at New York think tank the Council on Foreign Relations, said that Beijing's framing of itself as a leader in the pandemic and the touting of its epidemic response successes had stoked resentment, from Western countries in particular.

China also changed its version of events, having not disputed that it was the origin of the virus until late February when Zhong Nanshan, the prominent respiratory disease expert and government adviser, said it did not necessarily originate in China even though the first cases were discovered there, Huang said.

"If there is nothing to hide — and since most scientists would agree this is a naturally caused outbreak with no indication of being human-made — there is no reason [for China] to be resistant to the idea of investigating the origin," he said.

"It is important to look into it, to help prevent future outbreaks and also to break the transmission chain."

Huang said the effectiveness of a potential WHO inquiry would depend on the composition of its delegation, and access to labs in Wuhan — at the Wuhan Institute of Virology and the Wuhan Centre for Disease Control and Prevention — that US officials have suggested, without presenting evidence, could be linked to the outbreak.

Wei Zongyou, international relations professor at Fudan University in Shanghai, said the Chinese government may agree to an independent investigation if it were "initiated voluntarily rather than from international pressure".

"But when to accept this investigation, and whether it is directed only at China, may require further discussion," he said. "China has rejected this presumption that it is guilty, and the scapegoating of China to hide the gaps in other countries' epidemic responses."

Chinese foreign ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying has in recent days also highlighted reports of suspected early cases of the coronavirus in France and the US, to stress the complexity of tracing the origin. Her colleague Zhao Lijian had previously promoted an unsubstantiated conspiracy theory that the virus was brought to Wuhan by the US military.

Sulmaan Khan, a professor of international history and Chinese foreign relations at Tufts University in Massachusetts, said the main reason China was resistant to an independent inquiry was the loss of face from "a bunch of people telling you you're incompetent to do your own inquiry and they'll do it for you".

China has been conducting its own research into the origins of the virus, which the WHO has said it has not been invited to take part in.

"But the perception elsewhere right now of the relationship between China and the WHO is such that the WHO saying China is cooperating is not going to cut it with those calling for an international inquiry," Khan said.

Even if an international investigation were to be conducted, it would be difficult for experts to reach a definitive conclusion that completely ruled out the virus having non-animal origins, he said.