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Covid as biological war? China paper needs answers

EDITORIAL

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Revelations that Chinese military scientists discussed weaponising SARS coronaviruses five years before the emergence of COVID-19 have raised major questions about the pandemic's origins. They warrant full, transparent investigation. As Sharri Markson reported in *The Weekend Australian*, People's Liberation Army scientists and senior Chinese health officials set out their ideas "in a document that predicted a third world war would be fought with biological weapons". That document, written in 2015, was obtained by US State Department officials. It described SARS coronaviruses as heralding a "new era of genetic weapons". The viruses, it said, could be "artificially manipulated into an emerging human disease virus, then weaponised and unleashed in a way never seen before". Markson's new book, *What Really Happened in Wuhan*, will be published in September by HarperCollins. On Monday, she and Liam Mendes reveal that Chinese military scientists have also discussed the long-term psychological damage of bioweapons on adversaries, their ability to traumatise foreign troops and the advantages of launching attacks at far lower cost than through ground and air strikes.

Intelligence agencies have long suspected COVID-19 may be the result of an inadvertent leak from a Wuhan laboratory. In April last year, *The Australian* carried a report from *The Times* that momentum was growing behind a theory that the Wuhan Institute of Virology was the source of the pandemic. The institute, as the *British Medical Journal* has reported, "is only 10 miles from the site of the initial outbreak and is known to research wild coronaviruses".

As Markson wrote on Saturday: "There is no evidence to suggest it (the virus) was intentionally released." Be that as it may, there is a clear need for all 194 member states of the World Health Organisation, presumably excluding China, to insist at the World Health Assembly on May 24 on a credible investigation into the origins of the pandemic. At least 157 million people have been

infected in little more than a year, although the real number is probably far higher. At least 3.2 million are known to have died. The virus is raging across India and Brazil, and looming large in Africa. The global economy has been smashed. Yet almost nothing is known about a virus that, as Greg Sheridan wrote last week, “is just getting started”. In April last year, Scott Morrison led the world in calling for an investigation into the pandemic’s origins. Beijing reacted with irrational fury and has maintained the rage. At last May’s World Health Assembly Beijing finally caved in to global pressure and joined, albeit reluctantly, in universal support for the investigation Mr Morrison had sought. But China has remained unrelenting in its misplaced anger towards Australia. The ensuing WHO-China investigation, which was hamstrung by what Beijing would allow it to do, found the most likely start of the pandemic was a direct or indirect “zoonotic spillover to humans” that spread like wildfire. The least likely pathway for the pandemic, it found, was an inadvertent leak from the Wuhan Institute of Virology.

For the sake of three million dead, their loved ones and tens of millions of patients, the WHA and China should recognise the need for a full, credible investigation. Even WHO director-general Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus now concedes there needs to be further investigation into a possible lab accident. Dr Tedros, regarded previously as China’s man, has also joined in criticising the work of the WHO-China team for not being thorough or extensive enough. “Although the team has concluded that a laboratory leak is the least likely hypothesis, this requires further investigation ... I am ready to deploy,” he said on March 31. Dismissing the accident theory as “the least likely pathway” is no answer if everything possible is to be done to avoid future pandemics.

Senator James Paterson, chairman of parliament’s joint committee on intelligence and security, is correct when he says the Chinese military scientists’ document revealed by Markson raises major concerns about China’s lack of transparency. Written in Chinese and titled *The Unnatural Origin of SARS and New Species of Man-Made Viruses as Genetic Bioweapons*, it outlines China’s research into biowarfare. It refers to “the new-found ability to freeze-dry micro-organisms (that) has made it possible to store biological agents and aerosolise them during attacks”. Its 18 authors include senior Chinese health and military figures. It concludes that a third world war “will be biological” and “the core weapon for victory in World War Three will be bioweapons”. In light of the toll, a transparent investigation into the origins of COVID is imperative.

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