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**The Great Powers and the War Against COVID-19**

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) is defined as illness caused by a novel coronavirus now called severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2; formerly called 2019-nCoV), which was first identified amid an outbreak of respiratory illness cases in Wuhan City, Hubei Province, China.It was initially reported to the WHO on December 31, 2019. On January 30, 2020, the WHO declared the COVID-19 outbreak a global health emergency.On March 11, 2020, the WHO declared COVID-19 a global pandemic.

At the outbreak’s beginning, there were conspiracy theories that the virus was man-made; recently, questions have focused on whether a natural virus was accidentally spread through research.

In the United States, such speculation largely comes from politicians hawkish against Beijing and keen to defend the Trump administration. Scientists, meanwhile, are often the most hesitant to speak out, wanting to focus on research that helps end the outbreak, not who, if anyone, caused it.

But the theories have spread widely, prompting a response from U.S. officials and President Trump himself. So, here is a skeptic’s take on three rapidly mutating theories: one clearly false, one possible but not supported by known evidence and one broadly true.

As China placed Hubei province under lockdown in January, the Washington Times, a conservative U.S. newspaper, cited research by former Israeli military intelligence officer Dany Shoham to argue that “Coronavirus may have originated in lab linked to China’s biowarfare program” in Wuhan, the Hubei capital.

That article suggested that the Wuhan National Biosafety Laboratory and the Wuhan Institute of Virology had been working on biological warfare. Both institutions are real — they were hardly secretive — but there is no evidence of this. When contacted by The Washington Post for a Jan. 29 article, Shoham refused to comment further.

Experts suggesting that the virus was man-made relied on a shoddy understanding of the science. “Based on the virus genome and properties there is no indication whatsoever that it was an engineered virus,” Richard Ebright, a professor of chemical biology at Rutgers University, told The Post.Robert Garry, a virologist at Tulane University in New Orleans, later told Science News in March that the virus was fundamentally unlike something that would have been designed. “It has too many distinct features, some of which are counterintuitive,” he said.Despite this, a Pew poll released last week found almost 3 out of 10 Americans believed the virus could have been made in a lab; Those on the Republican side of the spectrum were twice as likely to believe this as Democrats.

As the bioweapon theory subsided in February, it was replaced by a more plausible alternative: That a virus from a natural source could have leaked accidentally from one of Wuhan’s laboratories.

This idea attracted high-profile political support. “We don’t know where it originated, and we have to get to the bottom of that,” Sen. Tom Cotton (R-Ark.) told Fox News in mid-February, before dismissing early suggestions that the virus had spread at a Wuhan market. “We also know that just a few miles away from that food market is China’s only biosafety level 4 super laboratory that researches human infectious diseases.”

Some scientists don’t dismiss this outright. In January, Ebright did not want to talk on the record about the idea of a leak because it was too speculative. He changed his mind and this week told The Post that he thinks it “at least as probable” as an incident outside of a lab, a position other scientists disagree with.

There is circumstantial evidence. Researchers at the Wuhan branch of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention did conduct research on bat coronaviruses, which some view risky, State Department expressed concern about the safety standard of the Wuhan labs in at least two cables, The Post’s Josh Rogin reported this week.

The numbers, particularly on testing, bear this out. The initial tests sent in February to just a handful of US laboratories by the administration were faulty.

By mid-March, the administration was promising at least 5 million tests by the end of the month. An independent analysis of totals on 30 March, however, indicate only a million tests have been conducted. That's more than any other country but the US population is roughly 329 million people.

What's more, because of crush of testing that has followed the initial shortages, the labs that analyse the results have been overwhelmed, leading to delays of a week or more before tested individuals can learn if they have the virus.Last week the US Congress passed a $2tn coronavirus relief bill, which included direct cash payments to many Americans, expanded unemployment assistance, aid to states, healthcare facilities and other public services, support for hardest-hit industries, and loans to small- and medium-sized businesses that can be forgiven if they avoid layoffs.