

COVID-19: Made in China?

by George Friedman - May 25, 2021

In a recent interview, Dr. Anthony Fauci was asked whether he was confident that COVID-19 developed naturally. He has long maintained that though it was not impossible, the virus was in all likelihood a product of natural evolution. But this time he said something curious: “No, actually. I am not convinced about that. I think we should continue to investigate what went on in China until we continue to find out to the best of our ability what happened.” In other words, he raised the possibility of unnatural and therefore nefarious origins.

I don't peddle in conspiracy theories, but my job often demands that I play devil's advocate for the sake of playing devil's advocate. So let's do that here.

Consider the supplementary information. Shortly after Fauci's statement went public, The Wall Street Journal ran a story about an intelligence leak (notably, the agency from which it was leaked was not named) that said that in November 2019 three researchers at a lab in Wuhan were hospitalized with COVID-like symptoms. This was a month before China reported the first cases. Implicit in the intelligence leak was the idea that the three men somehow contracted the illness in the lab, and that the Chinese government knew they had fallen ill.

The timing is certainly curious. It seems to me that Fauci made the statement with the approval of the White House, that the White House at least knew about the leak and allowed it to move forward, and that both were linked and done for some purpose.

One possible purpose offered by The Wall Street Journal is that the two were meant to force the World Health Organization, which is meeting shortly, to reexamine its conclusion that it was the result of natural causes.

Another possible explanation is that this could be the White House's attempt to let China know it knew the truth all along but allowed things to proceed as they did so as not to worsen bilateral relations. Put differently, it was a gesture meant to let China come clean on its own. Related to this is the domestic political angle. Throughout the campaign, Joe Biden trashed Donald Trump on all things (as challengers always do), including Trump's accusation of China's responsibility for the virus. If for some reason China was, in fact, responsible, then it would make sense for Biden to try to get ahead of the story without looking entirely foolish.

The PR angle applies to Beijing as well. If the Chinese fabricated this, it seems to me that it was to hide their incompetence and even stupidity. One of China's strategic weapons is the vision that it comprises millions of experts working with precision to dominate the world. In fact, China has lots of smart people and sometimes creates very successful industries but blunders like the rest of us. If the virus was fabricated and escaped, it looks more like incompetence, and incompetence is the one thing China cannot afford to reveal. Perhaps it did not know what it created and did not know what it would do to the world but understood it would look stupid, something neither the executives in the lab nor later the Central Committee could afford. China tried to cover and everything got out of control.

Now, let's come back down to earth. Neither of these explanations answers why China would have been creating such a virus in the first place. Manufacturing a biological weapon may be tempting for some governments, but they are bullets that can turn around and hit the shooter. Why develop something that would inevitably hit China as well as the rest of the world? If China was manufacturing these things as a purely intellectual enterprise, why not do it outside a major metropolitan area? Why not have a medical team on site that could tend to the exposed rather than allow them out into the world?

If the Chinese fabricated the virus, they were either completely incompetent or ignorant to what they had produced. I do not think the Chinese are foolish. Accidentally letting the virus out seems more plausible than deliberately unleashing it on your own public, especially considering that if China is capable of manufacturing something like this, it is probably capable of deploying it on its enemies.

Which brings me to my next point. If the virus was designed to ravage the world and allow China to emerge as a global hegemon, Beijing would still be guilty of ignoring the fact that it is the world's biggest exporter. It depends on exports to maintain its economy. Killing your customers is bad business, and indeed the pandemic hurt the Chinese economy as much as it hurt others.

Of course, there is the possibility that the virus just happened as sometimes they do, and that the recent leaks indicate nothing more than two governments scrambling to make sense of something they can't control. After all, if Biden wanted a WHO investigation, he could have just asked for it. If Washington wanted to be coy with China, it could have just reached out on informal channels.

I don't know what exactly was in the intelligence reports, and I don't know why there is a slow rhetorical shift in the White House. I only know that there is a shift that could change public opinion about China irreparably. The world's view of China and its relations to its major adversary, the United States, rests on this.

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